

No Way to Die

Linus Asong



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Titles by *Langaa* RPCIG

Francis B. Nyamnjoh

Stories from Abakwa
Mind Searching
The Disillusioned African
The Convert
Souls Forgotten
Married But Available

Dibussi Tande

No Turning Back: Poems of Freedom 1990-1993
Scribbles from the Den: Essays on Politics and Collective
Memory in Cameroon

Kangsen Feka Wakai

Fragmented Melodies

Ntemfac Ofego

Namondo, Child of the Water Spirits
Hot Water for the Famous Seven

Emmanuel Fru Doh

Not Yet Damascus
The Fire Within
Africa's Political Wastelands: The Bastardization of
Cameroon
Oriki'badan
Wading the Tide

Thomas Jing

Tale of an African Woman

Peter Wuteh Vakunta

Grassfields Stories from Cameroon
Green Rape: Poetry for the Environment
Majunga Tok: Poems in Pidgin English
Cry, My Beloved Africa
No Love Lost
Straddling The Mungo: A Book of Poems in English &
French

Ba'bila Mutia

Coils of Mortal Flesh

Kehbama Langmia

Titabet and the Takumbeng
An Evil Meal of Evil

Victor Elame Musinga

The Barn
The Tragedy of Mr. No Balance

Nguessimo Mathe Mutaka

Building Capacity: Using TEFL and African Languages as
Development-oriented Literacy Tools

Milton Krieger

Cameroon's Social Democratic Front: Its History and
Prospects as an Opposition Political Party, 1990-2011

Sammy Oke Akombi

The Raped Amulet
The Woman Who Ate Python
Beware the Drives: Book of Verse

Susan Nkwentie Nde

Precipice
Second Engagement

Francis B. Nyamnjoh &

Richard Fonteh Akum

The Cameroon GCE Crisis: A Test of Anglophone
Solidarity

Joyce Ashuntantang & Dibussi Tande

Their Campaign Party Will End! Poems in Honor of
Bate Besong

Emmanuel Achu

Disturbing the Peace

Rosemary Ekosso

The House of Falling Women

Peterkins Manyong

God the Politician

George Ngwane

The Power in the Writer: Collected Essays on Culture,
Democracy & Development in Africa

John Percival

The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite: Choice or Betrayal

Albert Azegeh

Réussite scolaire, faillite sociale : généalogie mentale de
la crise de l'Afrique noire francophone

Aloysius Ajah Amin & Jean-Luc Dubois

Croissance et développement au Cameroun :
d'une croissance équilibrée à un développement équitable

Carlson Anyangwe

Imperialistic Politics in Cameroon:
Resistance & the Inception of the Restoration of the
Statehood of Southern Cameroons
Betrayal of Too Trusting a People: The UN, the UK and
the Trust Territory of the Southern Cameroons

Bill F. Ndi

K'Crazy, Trees in the Storm and Other Poems
Map: Musings On Ars Poetica
Thomas Luring: The Fighting Sailor Turn'd Peaceable /
Le marin combattant devenu paisible

Kathryn Toure, Therese Mungah

Shalo Tchombe & Thierry Karsenti
ICT and Changing Mindsets in Education

Charles Alobwed'Epie

The Day God Blinkd

G.D. Nyamndi

Babi Yar Symphony
Whether losing, Whether winning
Tussles: Collected Plays

Samuel Ebelle Kingue

Si Dieu était tout un chacun de nous ?

Ignasio Malizani Jimu

Urban Appropriation and Transformation: bicycle, taxi
and handcart operators in Mzuzu, Malawi

Justice Nyo' Wakai

Under the Broken Scale of Justice: The Law and My
Times

John Eyong Mengot

A Pact of Ages

Ignasio Malizani Jimu

Urban Appropriation and Transformation: Bicycle Taxi
and Handcart Operators

Joyce B. Ashuntantang

Landscaping and Coloniality: The Dissemination of
Cameroon Anglophone Literature

Jude Fokwang

Mediating Legitimacy: Chieftaincy and Democratisation in
Two African Chiefdoms

Michael A. Yanou

Dispossession and Access to Land in South Africa: an
African Perspective

Tikum Mbah Azonga

Cup Man and Other Stories

John Nkemngong Nkengasong
Letters to Marions (And the Coming Generations)

Amady Aly Dieng
Les étudiants africains et la littérature négro-africaine
d'expression française

Tah Asongwed
Born to Rule: Autobiography of a life President

Frida Menkan Mbunda
Shadows From The Abyss

Bongasu Tanla Kishani
A Basket of Kola Nuts

Fo Angwafo III S.A.N of Mankon
Royalty and Politics: The Story of My Life

Basil Diki
The Lord of Anomy

Churchill Ewumbue-Monono
Youth and Nation-Building in Cameroon: A Study of
National Youth Day Messages and Leadership Discourse
(1949-2009)

**Emmanuel N. Chia, Joseph C. Suh & Alexandre
Ndeffo Tene**
Perspectives on Translation and Interpretation in
Cameroon

Linus T. Asong
The Crown of Thorns
No Way to Die

Vivian Sihshu Yenika
Imitation Whiteman

Beatrice Fri Bime
Someplace, Somewhere
Mystique: A Collection of Lake Myths

Shadrach A. Ambanasom
Son of the Native Soil
The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression: An
Introduction

**Tangie Nsoh Fonchingong and Gemandze John
Bobuin**
Cameroon: The Stakes and Challenges of Governance and
Development

Tatah Mentan
Democratizing or Reconfiguring Predatory Autocracy?
Myths and Realities in Africa Today

Roselyne M. Jua & Bate Besong
To the Budding Creative Writer: A Handbook

Albert Mukong
Prisonner without a Crime: Disciplining Dissent in
Ahidjo's Cameroon

Mbuh Tenu Mbuh
In the Shadow of my Country

No Way to Die

Linus T. Asong



*Langaa Research & Publishing CIG
Mankon, Bamenda*

Publisher:
Langaa RPCIG
Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Region
Cameroon
Langaagrp@gmail.com
www.langaa-rpcig.net

Distributed outside N. America by African Books Collective
orders@africanbookscollective.com
www.africanbookscollective.com

Distributed in N. America by Michigan State University Press
msupress@msu.edu
www.msupress.msu.edu

ISBN: 9956-558-46-X

© Linus T. Asong 2009
First Published in 2006 by Patron Publishing House,
Bamenda, Cameroon

DISCLAIMER

The names, characters, places and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Accordingly, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely one of incredible coincidence.

Contents

Part One

Chapter One

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	3
Manda Chabeule	17

Chapter Two

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	19
--	----

Chapter Three

Maximillian Essemu Aleukwienchaa	31
Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	37

Chapter Four

Manda Chabeule	41
Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	45

Chapter Five

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	49
Manda Chabeule	56

Chapter Six

Manda Chabeule	65
Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	68

Chapter Seven

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	85
---------------------------------	----

Chapter Eight

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	93
---------------------------------	----

Part Two

Chapter Nine

Dennis Nunquam Ndendemajem	109
----------------------------------	-----

Chapter Ten

Dennis Nunquam Ndendemajem	123
----------------------------------	-----

Chapter Eleven

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	135
---------------------------------	-----

Chapter Twelve

Maximillian Essemu Alekwienchaa	145
---------------------------------------	-----

Chapter Thirteen

Maximillian Essemu Aleukwienchaa	153
Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	166

Chapter Fourteen

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	171
Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	174

Chapter Fifteen

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	183
--	-----

Chapter Sixteen

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	191
--	-----

Chapter Seventeen

Dr. William Eshuonti	197
----------------------------	-----

Chapter Eighteen

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	205
--	-----

Chapter Nineteen

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	213
--	-----

Chapter Twenty

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	221
Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem	227

Epilogue

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa	235
--	-----

Chapter One

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

I STOOD with my back to the road, in the veranda. All dust, swimming pool for the fowls. What had I not done to stop this house from leaking? Tried everything, except zinc it. Yes, except zinc. How was I to get zinc? Steal? Not me. There it stood, my home. My hands I clasped behind me. Hands indeed! Fleshless hands! The legs of my trousers rolled up to my knees. I patched the trousers every week, but so what? Was it everything that I should take to the tailor? Look behind me and you would see exposed, my calves. When you fall sick all the time, when you suffer all the time, your calves can never look fresh. Always dry, emaciated.

In front of me and, half-hidden in the shade of the veranda, hung a broad canvas, insecurely strung from the cloth of an empty flour bag. You have to manage, man! The easel which supported the canvas, I made from three sticks bound together at the top ends with a string. Easy way! The legs were opened out to stand in the form of a triangle.

Dieudonne, my small son, was squatting in the centre and holding two of the sticks in place while I painted. That's the way we always did it. On the canvas was a painting. As for me I considered it completed, whatever people may say. Where I saw an end they saw a beginning. Let them say. I had taken some few steps, about three metres backwards

and was admiring it from the left, the right, and other different angles. That's what I used to do after finishing a painting. Stand back and look at it. It looked different that way.

Footsteps behind me, or it was what like that? Yes, they were footsteps. I turned.

"Good even, Denniz."

It was Mossah. Some people are born to die together. That I meet a man in prison by accident, then we leave at the same time, get work at the same time and live in the same quarter?

"Evening, Mossah," I responded.

"No work for you agen, sa?" he asked. "Since tri days today, nobody ih hear ya smell at de jobside?"

"Not been there," I told him. "I could not."

"You sick?"

I did not answer. Would answering keep Mossah quiet? Mossah? Unless you didn't know the man I am talking about. I went down on one knee and told Dieudonne under the canvas to pull the small stick backwards so that the picture would lie back a bit.

Manda heard Mossah talk and came out. Ask her why she came out and she would tell you she just came to greet. Lies! She wanted to hear what we were saying to each other.

Mossah came closer to the canvas.

"What is ya man drawing like dis wish he cannot even open his mot to talk?" he asked.

Manda was wearing a loin cloth that was folded just above her breasts and which passed under her armpits, exposing the entire upper part of her body. She took the lower front ends of the cloth in her right hand, adjusted them slightly between her legs, bent down and said to the boy under the easel:

"Dieu, tell Mr. Mossah what your papa is doing." She was smiling as she spoke. I knew she just wanted to laugh at me again.

“His self,” the boy said.

Manda was the first to laugh. She shook her shoulders and looked across at Mossah. She seemed to be hiding the laugh. Subdued amusement. She knew she could not get an answer from me. I had told Dieudonne what I was drawing and he did not want to make a secret of it. Things like that always made me boil with anger.

“He say what?” he asked Manda

“Did you not hear him say his father is drawing himself?”

“Where?”

“Ask him. You see a mad man with his child and you are asking somebody else?”

Manda would never remain silent if she saw that what she would say would make people laugh at me! But I knew that when she said ‘mad man’ she did not mean a really mad man. Just like saying somebody was doing something you did not understand. When Mossah asked again I told him: “Self-portrait. It’s me.” After all that’s what I was doing.

“You wan fo draw dat here or how?”

“Finished. I have finished.”

Mossah went over to where I was standing and looked at the canvas for a while. I knew what he was seeing: a single dark column painted to stand against a background that began with a deep green at the bottom and ended with a blue layer to the upper section. Between the green and, cutting right across the dark central column which I made to look half like a man with the head slightly lowered and half like the broken pillar of a huge building, I had put a thick white line.

“But dis no make no sense, Denniz,” he told me.

According to him it made no sense. Me, myself, did I make sense? He should have known, having been with me for that long. My end was their beginning, I thought again.

After staring at the canvas for another whole minute Mossah said:

“And you buy the paint nnoh!”

Why should he be surprised? Unnecessary. I told him flat:

“I make nothing, Mossah, except the drawing.”

Mossah was wearing a jumpa that reached over his knees and he was carrying a letter for me in his left hand which was hidden inside the dress. He pulled out the hand and held the letter to me.

“Dis is for you. I saw it in yor box long time. Many days.”

What did I have to do with letters? I examined the painting, then picked up my brush in my right hand. I was carrying a small tin of blue paint in my left hand. He made as though something would happen if I did not take the letter. I showed the back of my right hand and he placed the envelope on it with the address side facing up.

Some things, when they happen, you would not really be able to explain whey they happened that way. As I just threw a careless glance on the letter I felt a kind of fear so sudden that my whole body seemed to tremble. The letter fell down before I had time to look at the writing on it closely.

Manda bent down and picked it up and gave it back to me. I wondered what she thought it was. I cleaned my hands on my clothes and tried to study the stamp, wondering where it came from. I think Mossah knew what I was trying to find out because he said immediately:

“Is from Menako”

Manda and myself thought not only of the same thing but asked the same question.

“From Menako?” Then Manda asked:

“Who knows us in Menako?”

“Verkomze went to Menako, Mossah?” I was sure a dirty trick was being played on me.

“So only Verkomze can fit to write you, Denniz?”

I shrugged and sighed. Mossah ought to know better than that. Had I ever received any other letter apart from queries? What else could I say?

“The only letters I ever receive are queries about work, and Verkomze is the only one who queries me. You know that.”

I tore the envelope and carried my eyes at once to the address of the sender.

University Teaching Hospital
P.M. B. 2733
Menako,
N.W. Province
April 1, 1970

The letter was written on two sheets of paper. I turned to the name of the sender on the second sheet. Not Verkomze's name. It was a rubber stamp:

Dr. Maximillian Essemo Aleukwienchaa.
(M.D. Padua, Italy)

I held the letter closer to my eyes, rubbed them vigorously. I wanted to be sure it was no dream.

“M-a-x-i-m-i-l-l-i-a-n E-s-s-e-m-o!” I said softly to myself. Even in my own ears my voice sounded as if I was just waking from a long sleep.

“D-o-c-t-o-r M-e-d-i-c-a-l D-o-c-t-o-r. M-a-x-i-m-i-l-l-i-a-n E-s-s-e-m-o!” I read aloud.

Manda pushed the folds of the loin cloth further into her armpits and came to stand behind me, looking at the letter over my shoulder. I wanted to push her away, but something held my hands. I wanted to shout at her to go away, my tongue was tied. I whispered to her. My breathing instantly became faster and louder and I could feel bubbles of sweat rolling down my forehead. I asked for a chair but I did not wait for Manda to bring it over to me. I walked to it and threw myself on it before she touched it. I folded my arms over my bent knees and placed my head in them, face down.

The letter fell out of my trembling hands. I did not pick it up. I don't think I even noticed that it had fallen. I don't know how others thought about school wherever they were! Ours was a big joke. Before my closed eyes, my past, that bad dream, began to rise like a motion picture. I saw myself on the first day at school, bare-footed, jiggers all over my toes, my small jumpa cut and stitched from my mother's old loin cloth. Otherwise I would be naked!

January 15th, 1945. Government School, Bonalikondo: six mud-and-thatch huts, so poorly made that they were rebuilt after every heavy rainfall, or, as people said, every two weeks. In front of the class stood a probably middle-aged man with a heavy moustache turned completely brown with snuff which he took in every fifteen minutes or so. There were so many stories about Onaba and his snuff. Under his armpit he carried his usual *casingo*, a cane which he brandished as he spoke. He introduced himself:

"Onaba is my name, teaching is my job, and this classroom is my office?"

I again heard Onaba make his first announcement:

"You will begin this first day with a Sheep and Goats Test. School is no joke. That is what we do here every year... If you pass you will sit on the "A" side. You become the Sheep of this class. You fail, you sit on "B." You become the Goats. You mistake your side, twelve strokes of this cat-of-nine-tails," he shook the cane. "Spare the rod and spoil the child, says the Holy Bible."

"Every week you will have a test in the assemble hall," Onaba went on. "At the end of the year we count how many times you were a Sheep or a Goat. That is how you will be promoted..."

I saw myself being proclaimed as the first candidate in the first test. I saw myself as the leader of the thirteen sheep, the chosen few that Onaba asked to jeer at the seventeen goats so as to make them work harder in future.

I saw myself on the day of the second test. On my side was a boy almost of my own age and height, who had started making friends with me ever since the results of the first test were announced. He wore a shirt as white as the cassock of the priest who said mass in our church every Sunday. His pair of shorts too was so clean and so well starched and ironed that he carried a bundle of newspapers which he spread on the dusty benches before sitting down. He wore a pair of black shoes and stockings which rivalled even those of the teacher by going above the calves to just behind the knees. His book remained, as I can say, blank for over fifteen minutes after we had been told to start writing.

“Are you not writing?” I was asking the boy

I heard the boy confess:

“I don’t know what to write. I know nothing. Please, help me.”

I saw myself leaving my work open under my elbow for the “white boy” (as we called him thereafter) to copy from, so that he could become a Sheep. If Onaba caught me I would be a dead man. The cat-of-nine-tails would finish me. Kill me alive, as he would say.

That Goat which I turned into a Sheep and refused to accept any money in exchange, called himself Maximillian Essemo Aleukwienchaa! And for the next hundreds of tests we took, Maximillian Essemo’s place as a Sheep was guaranteed. He always made sure we sat together. And I was glad to help him pass.

Friday, December 21st, 1951, that too I saw. Why it was that every name from my school years brought back the whole past, I did not know. That day too rose before me for the..., I can’t count how many times. That was the day the results of the PROVINCIAL were released. We called the graduation examination from the Primary school, PROVINCIAL. I don’t know how the name came about.

Ayomba, our beloved headmaster was talking. Who will ever forget Ayomba's voice? Who can ever forget his name? Every word of what Ayomba said that day, that year, I still remember as accurately as he said it. There are words you hear and know you carry with you into your grave. Ayomba's words were such words.

"Thirty candidates entered for this examination. Twenty-one passed. And the first candidate is none other than Dennis Nunqam."

Ayomba read on, until he came to the last name.

'And the last but not the least to pass is Max-im-ill-ian Esse-mmo.'

That was precisely how he read the name. Nothing added, nothing subtracted. I could hear Ayomba's farewell speech sounding and resounding again in my ears.

'You are all going out into the world that lies before you like an unpathed ocean of water. You have a future. You are the very blocks on which the future of this nation depends...Let the sky be your limit. And wherever you go after here, whatever you become after now, always remember that you have the moral obligation as fruits of this noble institution, to leave your footprints in the sands of time...But remember as you make this arduous journey through life that there will always be surprises. The failing list might grow longer than this. It might grow shorter. So might the passing list. For, in this world of ours no condition is permanent. Was it not written in the book of knowledge that some shall be first that were last and some last that were first? There lies your challenge – to retain your station, or rise, if you have already succeeded. But never fall...'

I opened my eyes. They ached with sadness. I looked about me. There was no letter anywhere. Surely, I had just dreamt. I had not received anything from a doctor called Maximillian. Maximillian was still a Goat. My senses had played me false. Or?

"You are looking for the letter, Dennis?" Manda asked.

Curious to know what might have thrown me into such a deep thought from the letter, she had picked it up. She had just read the final word in it when I woke up from my trance.

“Which letter?” I asked, then I came back to myself and agreed: “Yes, I am looking for it. Give me.”

Mossah was standing a few yards away, facing me, looking at me, wondering. I stretched out the letter, the entire upper half of my body rising and falling rapidly. I felt sick. And I had not as much as read the letter itself. I was not superstitious, but I thought that the strange reaction to the few words I had read was a very bad sign. Then I read the whole of it.

My Dear Dennis,

Can you believe that I only got to know your whereabouts last month? And I returned from Italy in October 67! Three full years today. Perhaps you did not even know that I had long returned.

Ever since my days in Europe I had been thinking of you, wondering what had become of my good old friend, where you too could have gone to, what you might be doing, and things of the sort. Sometimes I even felt the urge to write but I did not know your address and there was just no means of knowing it out there. And then I ran into an old picture of our junior football team of those primary school days. It was in the house of another old friend of ours, Maurice Chem. You must still remember him. He has a job now with the National Auditors Association here in Menako. Actually, he was the one who told me that he had seen you just a month ago when they came down to audit the Central Co-operatives there in Mbongo. He told me you work there.

If I should quote him rightly, he said you worked there as an office messenger. In fact, I mention this point not to embarrass you but because it leads to a suggestion I want to make. I don't know how you feel being an office messenger but I think it is not much. I am sure you must not be earning more than 20,000 francs a month. The job itself does not sound wonderful in my ears for a chap like you

whose real worth I happened to have known so well. And I can almost guess that you would not insist on being there if you had a better alternative.

I want to offer you that better alternative. Quit that job and come and put up with me here. As the head of the University Teaching Hospital I have a house of over ten rooms to myself, so you will be very comfortably lodged. Your financial problems, I assure you, will be very satisfactorily catered for because money is not one of my worries. And above all, I have contacted my fellow lecturers here and they are ready to work with me to raise you from nothing to something in this country.

Give the matter serious thought and if it sounds good (as I am sure it should), let me know at once. We will be inspecting some of our medical students in Kolom later this month. I should be able to call at your department, on or about the 25th of this month. If you could make yourself available around closing hours on that day we could talk things further and even go and see where you live. But just in case I delay incoming, stop a blue Mercedes 280 that bears the number – MSF 2314. That's my car. In the meantime, please reply to assure me that you got the letter.

Most affectionately yours,

Manda had been watching me as my eyes moved from one line to the other. My reaction which had begun with my abandoning the letter made it impossible for her to express the joy in her heart which the contents called for. She was looking at me as I was biting my lips, blinking my eyes and shaking my head the way I always did whenever I was deeply disturbed by some event. I say whenever as if there was a time when something had not made me angry. I am sure Mossah too did not understand what was happening. How could he?

“How, Denniz, any bad insite the letter?” he asked.

“Nothing bad at all, Mr. Mossah,” Manda answered, angry that I did not look excited.

“It is very good news. I don’t know why Dennis is looking like that when God has at last buttered his bre ...”

“Shut up your mouth, Manda.” I finally found the voice to shout. Little Dieudonne was anxious to go away. He had noticed that I was in no mood to continue painting. He came and stood between me and his mother and asked: “Papa, you no draw egen?”

I denied by shaking my head. It was not unusual for people to interrupt me whenever I was painting. But I always went back to continue and either completed it or carried the work to a certain level of development. But on this particular occasion I could not get back on track. If I tried to paint I would not know how to proceed. I had to abandon the entire exercise. After the interruption I could not continue.

A baby’s voice was heard in the room. It was my child’s voice, not just any baby. He was crying. Mossah looked at me and my wife for a while. I may not have been really hearing. It sounded like a voice out of the past, distant.

Manda was standing arms akimbo to my right, looking down directly at me, her surprise at my behaviour turning into shame. And perhaps she was justified in feeling so. Although she often criticized me even openly I always kept silent. Never before, not even once had I thrown a truly angry word at her and mean it, like the way I asked her to shut her mouth.

There were times when she had taunted me over matters she knew she should have ignored, but even then I had kept silent. And on the day of that letter she may not even have been guilty of any offence! Let’s look at the situation objectively: we had received news which she knew or believed was going to end all the miseries in which we had lived ever since we got married. What had she done to deserve such disgrace in front of a stranger? Stranger? Mossah was no stranger. Why did I have to be so hard on myself? The child in the room was now screaming.

"The child cry, Denniz," Mossah repeated.

I looked at him, screwed my mouth and looked away.

"The child cry, madam Manda"

Manda too did not stir. I was never able to fathom what was going through her mind as she stood there listening, but not hearing, looking, but not seeing. It was the little boy who went in to see his brother.

"I go me back home, Denniz," Mossah said. The way we were behaving worried him. It would have worried anybody.

"Okay." My head was lowered as I spoke

"You will come to job tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Madam Manda, bye-bye."

"Mr. Mossah, I beg you please, good bye," Manda said after a whole minute, after Mossah had already left the veranda and was walking away.

She then went into the house and taking the child who was still crying into her arms returned with a stool which she placed in front of me and sat down.

"Dennis, what have I done to you?" She asked me.

I did not answer until she repeated her question.

"What was wrong with what I said?"

"Why do you think I thought there was something wrong with it?"

"Because you insulted me."

I looked at her as if I thought I was being falsely accused. In a way it was a false accusation because it was not what I said that offended her but my reaction to the letter. I did not express the excitement that she expected. "You said I should shut up my mouth. Why?" she asked.

"I didn't know that I said so," I told her. And I was serious about that. I did not really know until I had said it to her. I tried to get her mind away from the letter.

"How could I have said so to you? Why?"

"I know how?" she said.

"I am sorry. Take the children into the house. Leave me alone," I told her.

She took the children in and after a few minutes she came back out, I had opened the letter and placed it flat on the ground in front of me. Supporting my head with my hands over my knees I was going over it, repeating the words DOCTOR, HEAD OF THE UNIVERSITY TEACHING HOSPITAL, MERCEDES 280, and many others to myself.

"Who wrote to you like that, Dennis?" Manda came back to the letter.

I did not answer. When she insisted I replied:

"Somebody."

"A friend.?"

"An enemy."

Manda smiled a bit and looked into my eyes to see if I was just being ironical as she always believed me to be. My eyes must now have become redder than before and I was chewing angrily at my lips.

"When will you reply?" She asked.

"Never," I told her.

"Dennis, please, tell me what is wrong," she pleaded.

"Who said something is wrong?"

"But look at how you are doing..."

"If your heart tells you that something is wrong, then I cannot change it. Let whatever is wrong be wrong," I told her. Then she hit the nail on the head.

"And it is that letter that is causing. Perhaps you did not read the letter correctly, Dennis. It should not make you angry..."

I thought the error was hers not mine. I told her:

"It should not make you glad Manda, if you read it correctly. Come, sit here and look at it."

I ran my finger over it until I came over the sentence in which the Dr Max said something about my job and what he earned.

“Read this, Manda,” I said. “What is wrong with being an office messenger? Are messengers not people? Is 20,000 francs not money? Are there no people who earn less than that? Are there no people who do not even earn anything?”

Manda did not answer. I read down until I came to where the Dr. Max said he would raise me “*from nothing to something*.” I thought the insult was too obvious. I asked her:

“Manda, am I nothing? Am I not married with two children, boys who will continue to live after we have died? Do we not eat three times a day? Do you say you read this letter?”

“I read it, Dennis,” she said.

“And do you say you don’t know what is wrong with me?”

“I don’t know, Dennis,” she said.

“You will never know,” I told her. “When I am angry with myself, you are the first to tell me not to worry, that I should not think that I am not somebody. But when somebody else calls me nothing, you are the first to join to support. If people do not know how I feel about being an office messenger, tell them that I feel fine. If people tell you that I am nothing, tell them that I am something. If they want to make *nothing into something* tell them that they want to make *something into nothing*.”

I folded the letter very carefully as though to preserve it and then began to tear it up into bits which I rose and, entering the house, threw into the fire that burned in the kitchen.



Manda Chabeule

When I saw rain trying to come I cried:

“Papa God, what kind of bad luck thing is this?”

I started by being surprised, not that I was really bitter against my husband. I looked over the trees at the sky, the eye of God, as my father would call it. What I saw was not rain clouds but a dark wicked frown. A portion of the clouds that rose over our little corner of the village stood like a big eyelid about to squeeze out a tear of sadness. And why, I wondered angrily, would any God who had eyes to look at us not weep?

And that cruel wind, like the breath of God panting in annoyance! It was attacking from all sides, the sticks and thatches which I called our house, angrily tearing off pieces of thatches and just throwing and scattering them into the black bush surrounding us. The black bush was ready to swallow everything! And it would swallow everything. Why, because Papa God was angry, and had a very good reason to be angry with us.

Sighs were just pouring from my mouth like rain falling from the sky. I went me in to see how much more I could still do to prepare for that rain. The real truth about the poor, miserable way in which we lived had never come to my mind the way it did that day. The smell of dirt, the grass mattress that had been reduced to stinking flabs by age and children’s urine; the children’s clothes, rags, really heavy with patches, stains of excrement you could never wash clean; the crumbling walls plugged with rags and papers; and then the roof, all holes. Did he say we lacked nothing?

I had always looked at our condition as a misfortune from God. After all not everybody was rich, not every woman married a rich man I would say. I had married a man who

was too poor to maintain a constant supply of soap to wash his children's clothes, a man who was too poor to buy Dunlop mattresses; a man who could not afford zinc for the roof of his house or cement blocks for the walls. Then, here was a letter which, as I can say, was sent by Papa God himself! The holes on the roof and walls, the empty pots and empty boxes seemed to me just then to be like self-inflicted wounds, ulcers which my husband himself had opened in our lives and was determined to let them drain away our life-blood.

He was standing behind the house, under a tree, arms folded, his head held down, not caring about the rain that was going to fall, not fearing the storm that would also come. He was deceiving himself, saying:

"Money is not my problem.... Mercedes 280... The Head of the University Teaching Hospital... Fellow lecturers." I think he must have been dreaming, standing up. Like somebody dreaming... Our two sons, the elder carrying the brother on his back had come and they were standing between their father's feet, saying in a sing-song manner.

"Papa, give we chop, papa, we want chop..."

Whether he was even hearing, I don't know. But what he did after that frightened me a lot. He just left the children behind the house and, returning to the veranda, ran a knife through the painting he had been making, cutting it into two. The way he treasured his paintings, I think he could even put that same knife into somebody's stomach without caring. Sometimes Dennis did things in a way only he alone understood.

Chapter Two

*

Maximillian Essemole Alekwieunchaa

MY DEEP blue Mercedes 280 cruised into the premises of the Central Co-operatives Agency in Mbongo. When it comes to keeping time, man, the white man and myself are at a par. 25th April, as promised. Exactly 2 o'clock, thirty minutes before closing time for the Agency. Several of the workers were already on their way home, or so it seemed. You could tell that not many such vehicles came that way. They would tell that one over and over again, you bet!. From behind the tinted glasses of the car I could see people stand and stare with inquisitive surprise as I drove to a halt at the lower section of the compound.

Workers who were still in the offices rose to the narrow windows and gazed fixedly. Did they think it was a comet or something? A rare spectacle, it must have seemed to them. They looked more surprised when the door of the car swung open. They must have expected a white man, for I overhead one say:

“Ah! Na Blackman-o!” Trust me to pull my weight!

They were exchanging glances and pointing at me. Because of the slightly tinted glasses on the windows of the car, and because they had been watching from the distance, it might not have been possible for them to tell the colour of the man driving. But I knew that in places like that anybody would have sworn its owner was none other

than a pot-bellied, bald-headed white man, some Managing Director from Ovenga. I remembered how we used to feel as kids whenever we saw a Mercedes.

But I emerged, a black man emerged. They must have cursed their judgments. Not that I didn't look respectable. To hell, me? In my polished attire? That may have only added to their curiosity.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, I pulled at the sleeve of my coat and glanced at my watch. Some three men had just left the office and were conversing and walking towards the entrance where I stood. I beckoned to them:

"Hello, one minute. Can you help me please?"

You have never seen people fear another human being like a visitor from Mars! One of the men who was walking in front of the others pointed to his chest inquiringly.

I nodded.

The man took three steps and halted.

"Good afternoon, sa."

"Thank you. Good afternoon. Do you work here?" I asked. The question seemed superfluous, but it would have been worse if I took for granted that he worked there when, in fact, he was just passing by.

There was a moment's hesitation. I knew they were ill at ease, but what could I do? I had my mission to accomplish.

"Yessa," he said.

"I am looking for a gentleman who is supposed to be working here to," I told him. "His name is Mr. Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem. Can you be of help?"

The man did not answer immediately. His lips twitched with visible nervousness and then he turned towards his two comrades.

"He is looking for Mr. Dennis."

The third man clenched his index finger with his thumb and lifted three fingers.

"In the name of God who made heaven and et, I don know him, sa. I am only a stranger. I only..."

“You don’t need to swear,” I said smiling. “If you don’t know him, no problem. Where do you think I can find out about him? He’s expecting me.”

In his agitation the man missed the smile on my face and the friendliness in my voice.

“Ovadere, sa,” he indicated vaguely. “If you go to de front side dere, round. Chief will tell you. He know everybody.”

“Can I drive right there?”

“For sure sa,” he said, happy to leave me. “Lorries go dere. Dhey pass dere always.”

“Thank you very much. Goodbye.”

He went away. I surveyed the building briefly from where I stood for a while. The tiles that made the roof had fallen off from large areas which were now covered with rusty sheets of zinc. The line where the wall met the ground had long disappeared under heaps of earth that crumbled daily through the years from the walls and had now risen to just about a metre below the narrow windows. Thus from the distance the whole structure looked like a half-interred, gigantic coffin on the crest of an enormous grave.

The road to the front passed just below a grassy lawn that sloped from the building. The law was littered with refuse. It was obvious that no conscious effort had ever been made to make it look neat: banana peelings, remains of foods and papers thrown probably from the office windows above, torn pieces of jute bags and discarded tarpaulins. Just the sort of things I hate to see around an office building!

I drove round and parked my car on the other side of the road that passed in front of the antiquated building, and crossed to the veranda. A large blackboard with the inscription NOTICEBOARD scribbled in white paint at the top edge, was leaning against the wall. Two dusty pieces of information were hanging on the board. I bent and

examined the notices. I could not read any of them because of dust. They were very old notices because the date above one of them was 1965. I walked away towards one of the doors that bore in bold lettering the words CHIEF CLERK ONLY, on a piece of cardboard.

The door was half-open and I could hear the sound of some light music issuing from within. I knocked and waited. There was no answer. Perhaps I had not knocked hard enough to make a sound that would rise above the music. I leaned forward and peeped through the space below the middle hinges, just to make sure that there was somebody in before knocking again.

There was a man inside. He was sitting behind a large wooden table with two very old large files lying on either side of the table. He apparently had removed his shoes and placed them under the table. His toes that showed through his ragged stockings were spread in lazy comfort over the table. I knocked once more and listened.

“Com’on bring yaself right in here, if you know you are nice-looking,” the occupant shouted in a very raw voice.

I pushed the door wide open and stepped in, saying and greeting as I did so:

“I think I am good-looking, good afternoon, sir.” The accent on the last word was a mere formality. That bloke was not my Sir, and could never be by any standards. The joke on ‘good-looking’ fell flat. I thought the men I had encountered in front of the building were nervous, but this man’s case was worse. Madness. As though experiencing the unreal, the pupils of his eyes dilated and his eyes closed and opened a hundred times that split second.

“Goo-goo-good aftnoon, sir,” he rose to attention.

“Welcome, Sir. Good afternoon, Sir, Please sit down, Sir.”

He only realized after he had made the offer that there was only one chair in the office, his own.

“Please, sit on my chair, Sir. I can stand.”

“Oh, you don’t mind, please. I have only come to enquire about a friend.” I tried to calm him down. It only confused him the more.

“To be true and candid, Sir, I did not know that it was you.”

Perspiration had suddenly burst from every pore in his face. He flung the loose sleeve of his shirt across his face to wipe it. His shirt, unbuttoned, was almost falling off his back. He grabbed it and, pushing first one button and then the other into the wrong holes, he thrust the front part of his shirt, which he had allowed to hang out into the belt of his trousers. An old newspaper laid open on the table with the remains of groundnuts he had been chewing. He dragged the newspaper to the floor and forced his foot into his left shoe. He ran to the corner of the office and pulled an empty box from which two huge rats escaped.

“Please sit down on my chair, Sir. I will sit here.”

I hesitated, stretched my hand and taking the chair from him said:

“Thank you, but my mission here is rather brief. I am doctor Maximillian Essemu of the University Teaching Hospital in Menako...”

I was interrupted. First he pressed a bell on his table and then without waiting for a response ran to the veranda and shouted:

“Who’s over there?”

“Me Chief,” a man answered.

“You facking bastard. When I query you, you cry and cry. You say I am too serious with my work. How many weeks since you swept this office of mine?”

The man followed him in and said:

“I swepted it dis morning, Chief. De granuts is just...”

“Shorrop your rotten mouth. You did not. I see this again I give you two queries.”

He turned to me again with some feeling of achievement and relief:

“I am very sorry for intervening your words like that, Sir. To be true and candid, in fact, I really find it above my capacity to control these people. But I really control them. They do not do their jobs at all, at all. If I am not here the whole thing will collapse down completely.”

He paused for a second.

“You said you were who, Sir? Those idiots were disturbing me.”

He had forgotten, for he was not even listening when I spoke. Too frightened to listen attentively. I told him again.

“Ohhh! Doctor! Good. Fine. I am called Verkomze Eldred, doctor. I am the chief of this our nonsense thing here.”

Somehow I thought we would shake hands. He forgot about that formality.

“Why do you call your job nonsense thing? Work is work.”

I raised my hand toward his and we finally shook hands, the Chief struggling to look relaxed.

“You should have a certain gentleman in this your department by the name of Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem,” I told him. “That’s what has brought me here.”

Verkomze’s brows drew together into a deep furrow of consternation. He stared suspiciously at me for one long silent minute. I could see that he was very frightened. He then said defensively:

“We have the man here, Sir. I mean, Doctor. We have him, Doctor. Before I came here he was working. They employed him before I came. What has he done, Doctor?”

“Dennis is a very good friend of mine,” I went on. I also felt some slight embarrassment at the man’s reactions. I tried to allay his fears. “Actually I was to meet him here today at this hour.”

Verkomze felt the waist of his trousers and noticed that the tail of his shirt was still hanging out. He tucked it in, looked at his shoes and changed them and sat up. Perhaps he thought I was no doctor. Perhaps I was a secret police officer. Perhaps I was just teasing him with the news of friendship with Dennis. How could Dennis be friends with such a man, he must have been wondering. It struck me that he did not seem to have a very high opinion of Dennis. I told myself that I would ask him why. But unfortunately I did not follow that up. Striking an attitude of seriousness he said:

“Doctor, that man you are talking about like that, to be true and candid, in fact, he is really wonderful.”

“I don’t quite get you, Mr. Verkomze,” I said.

He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. It looked like he wanted to say something but feared to volunteer information that might incriminate him. He began hesitantly.

“Doctor, to be true and candid, I mean because I have not seen him since. Since the other days, doctor.”

“I wrote him to tell him that I would be coming here today.”

“This month not so, Doctor?”

“Yes.”

“It was a long blue letter. It was in a long blue envelope not so, Doctor?”

“I think so. Yes it was. What makes you say so?”

“Because there was a letter for him. I think last week or so, Doctor. In fact, I sent one of my subordinates to hand it over to him in his residence.”

“And he did?”

“He did, Doctor. If he did not render it he would have given it back here, Doctor. That must be your letter, Doctor. He does not get letters like that, Doctor. That was the onliest one.”

“You mean he never gets letters?”

“Letters? He, em-em-, in fact, doctor. He gets them. Why, not? He gets them. I mean letters in long blue envelopes, Doctor. He does not get them always.”

For some reason he seemed again to find my question suspicious.

“Was he at work today?”

“Nevertheless, doctor. He did not come.”

“Where does he live?”

“To be true and candid, in fact, personally I do not really know the whereabouts of his house, Doctor. But let me see if the individual who took it to him is still around. He knows him properly.”

He called in one of his men from the adjoining office.

“Look if Mossah is still in his cubicle.”

“Yes, Chief.”

Outside the office at the distant end of the building a crowd had gathered. The first three men whom I had met at the entrance into the compound had not continued on their way home. As soon as I had driven to the front of the building they had hurried back and perhaps announced to those who were still in the offices that somebody from Ovenga, perhaps a police commissioner, was looking for Dennis. Rumours as to the possible reasons for wanting Dennis had started circulating among them. Dennis, they assumed, was being sought for some hideous crime he had committed.

Verkomze introduced the man who had been called in to me:

“Here he is, Doctor... He is Mossah. He is...”

“No, Sa. No, Chief. I ... I... No, Chief.” Ignorant of why he had been called in, the frightened man began to defend himself.

“No sa, that what?” Verkomze was furious. “You are not Mossah?”

Mossah's face ran through a dozen different expressions: fear, indignation, shame, bewilderment, doubt... Before he came in he may have made up his mind even before hearing why he was being called that he would deny any relationship between Dennis and himself, if they asked him. He wanted to tell Verkomze that the visitor was looking for Dennis Nunqam, not Mossah, that he was not Dennis.

"I require you to take this big doctor to Mr. Dennis's house."

Mossah looked at Verkomze and then turning towards me and seeing that I too was looking at him, he greeted:

"Godafnoon, Sa. Exchoose me, Sa. Welcome, Sa."

I was standing about a metre from Mossah. I walked up to him and putting one hand on his shoulder said:

"Let me make this plain, Mr. Mossah. I have not come to catch anybody here. I have only come to look for my friend. So, relax." I tried to sound as friendly as I could.

"Yessa."

"And, Mr. Verkomze, how come everybody is behaving like this? Do I look like a policeman?"

"Oh, nevertheless, Doctor. No such matter." Verkomze tried to conceal his own nervousness behind a mirthless smile. "How can you be a police constable, Doctor? Who said?"

"Everybody looks so tense. I am sorry to be causing such uneasiness."

"Oh, never mind, Doctor. You see, Doctor, to be true and candid, in fact, these people are too localized. When they see people like you in aeroplane cars, they do like infants. They are always like that."

"Please, tell them that I am here as a friend. I am not what they are thinking."

Mossah came very near to denying any knowledge of the letter.

“So Mr. Mossah, can we go?” I gave him a friendly and reassuring pat on the back.

Yessa.”

The expression on his face was one of grim resignation. He walked like a criminal leaving a courtroom in which he had just been condemned to death, or a patient who had just been told that he had a fatal, incurable disease.

From the end of the building, his co-workers began to whistle and cough and bark. He held his head down until he entered the car. I was just about to drive off when Verkomze came and very politely beckoned me out of the car. Then he enquired with the utmost concern:

“Doctor, to be true and candid, in fact, tell me, what has Mr. Dennis really done that you want him so badly?”

“Nothing, Mr. Verkomze,” I said. “I thought I have convinced you that we are good friends. I don’t think I said I wanted him SO BADLY. Did I sound urgent? Actually I came for some official business in Kilom and since I had written to him to expect me I felt I should keep my word. Don’t get me wrong.”

“O.k. Doctor. I understand you. Thank you very much.”

Now that the man looked a bit more relaxed, I decided to ask him a few questions which his nervousness had made it hard for me to do so. I first asked about the Agency, its history and the kind of duties it performed. And to this Verkomze explained that the building had been put up some fifty years ago when the cocoa trade was at its peak. Mbongo stands at the junction of the main roads that go to the large industrial cities of the west and north-west from the mainly agricultural southern regions. The building was used at that time as a storehouse for produce from the forests of Mbongo and its environs in readiness for transportation to the north-west and west. With time, for want of proper husbandry, the soil of Mbongo lost its fertility and the cocoa trade retreated farther and farther into more distant forests beyond

it. For ten years the building had been virtually abandoned, though not destroyed. The introduction of fertilizers and other improvements in agriculture, coupled with the impoverishment of the soils in the other areas encouraged businessmen to return to Mbongo to re-establish themselves. The Central Cooperatives Agency was then formed. It was an organization that stored and distributed fertilizers from the government to farmers in the more remote villages in the surrounding forest areas. There, farmers came for advice and instructions on how to mix the chemicals and when to apply them on their crops.

I asked him about the kind of job Dennis did there. Verkomze thought the question was another trap.

“He does not always attend work, Doctor. And when he comes he just does this and that and so on. I give them all queries when they do not do their work.”

Chapter Three

*

Maximillian Essemo Aleukwienchaa

THE MAN called Mossah led me back down the road through which I had come and then across the little town. I drove rather slowly and had to avoid running over children, goats, pigs and dogs which kept dashing from one corner of the narrow dirty street to the other, either frightened or attracted by the sight of the vehicle that passed so near their homes.

The main road that passed through the centre of the town had once been tarred and it still bore tar traces in areas that had survived decades of rainfall and erosion. Several concrete buildings, mainly beer bars and provision shops owned by very rich farmers graced the road on either side. Some were painted white and others yellow or green, but through age all the colours had lost their lustre. A few of these had glass windows, broken in places and replaced with sheets of cardboard. At fairly regular intervals stood signs that plans had once been envisaged for bringing electricity to Mbongo. Long poles lay flat on the ground close to mounds of earth that had once been dug from holes for the poles. In some places the poles leaned on buildings, while in others portions had been chopped for wood.

Here a house stood that had been begun with cement blocks just a metre above the foundation or up to the window level and then permanently abandoned, the blocks now turned mossy-green. There stood a house raised to the roof

level but covered with thatches. And, inside, a grotesque structure that might have been the foundation of a church or dancing hall with a wall raised to one or two metres above the ground. Smoke could be seen issuing from a hut constructed from the dented zinc of some older buildings.

But life seemed to be going on cheerfully. In verandas, street corners or palm wine shades people gathered in groups of threes, fours, fives and more, singing, drinking or cursing at the top of their voices.

I learned later that several years ago when Mbongo was the greatest producer of cocoa the Municipal Council had decided to dig a road to link Mbongo with Kolom so that their products could go by train to the north. Money had been voted and given to the Mayor. He had hired a caterpillar and after only a week's labour the project had been abandoned. The Mayor had swindled half the money which he had sent for the construction of a house in his village. Only one kilometre of road had been dug.

It was at the end of this abandoned road that Dennis lived. The road Mossah showed me now led from the centre of the town towards some very tall trees that stood at the distant outskirts. I got a bit worried, so I had to enquire:

"Are we on the right route, Mr. Mossah?"

"Yessa!"

"Can a lorry go right to where Dennis lives?" I asked.

"I don't know, Sa. I only wend to de house de day de Chief send me dat I must go and give de letter. I did not even want to go because I don't like to go to people's house. I was not looking at de road. I tink rollies go dere, Sa. But I don't know."

I decided I would ask him no more questions. He didn't believe yet that I was a friend. Dennis Nunqam lived in Sabongari, a resettlement area. I learned later too that very many years ago the Mayor for Mbongo had made it law that only houses built with cement blocks and roofed with

corrugated iron sheets were to be allowed to stand along the main road. Those that did not conform to this regulation were pulled down and their owners given six months to rebuild accordingly or lose their plots.

People like Pa Ste, Dennis's father who could not afford better houses were forced to leave the centre of the town for Sabongari. Pa Ste had put up the house where Dennis now lived, had lived there for a few years before returning to settle in his native village in Bonalikondo in the Southern region.

When, from a distance Mossah noticed that Dennis had shut his door, he told me:

“Dat is the house down dere, Sa. I wand to go down and easy myself behind dis house Sa.”

We were about two hundred metres from the house he was pointing at. I opened the car door and let him out. I waited for over ten minutes and then decided to drive up to the house he had indicated and wait for him. I was to learn some time afterwards that Mossah fled that same night and was not seen again in Mbongo for a very long time.

After waiting for about ten minutes more I went round the house, calling my friend's names. I even began to feel that I had been led to the wrong place because the house did not look in the least habitable. It was a tasteless, dilapidated hut of sun-dried bricks and thatches which stood almost alone at the end of an abandoned road that was once used by the defunct Coast Timber Company for exploiting forest products. When I went up to its termite-ridden door and tried to shake it, it looked as if the whole thing would collapse. I entered my car and drove a short distance up to a nearby house to verify where exactly I was.

The door of the other house was open but, here too, there did not seem to be anybody at home. I horned for a long time and then an old woman came out.

“Good afternoon mama,” I greeted.

“Good afternoon, son,” she answered, studying me from toe to head with very keen interest and admiration. I told her that I was looking for the house of Mr. Dennis Nunqam who.

“That is the house down there, son,” she pointed back to the small house I had just visited. Then she asked me:

“Son, are you the big man who was to come from Ovenga and see them?”

I had turned to go down to the house. But I decided to ask her how she came to know that somebody was to come there that day.

“Manda is my daughter,” she said. “She tells me everything...”

I got to know that Manda was the name of Dennis’ wife, and that they had two children, sons.

“And Manda is your child?”

“Yes, what can I call her? A woman is the mother of all children. Manda is my child, as I can say.”

“So they know I was to come here, mama?”

“They did.”

“But why is the house locked? They are not in.”

“I don’t know, son. Perhaps they have gone to the village to see people, to see the people of Manda. They were not talking nicely in the night. They were quarrelling. And since morning I did not see anybody. All the two boys too.”

“What were they quarrelling for, mama?”

The woman giggled for a long time.

“How can I know, son?” she asked. “I am always in bed with this my death which they call headache, so I don’t know things that pass outside.”

I climbed to the veranda and pulled a stool that had only two legs. I leaned the side with the missing leg against the wall and sat down.

“Dennis is a very good friend of mine, mama,” I said.

“Ssoh?” she marvelled.

“Yes, mama. We went to school together, very many years ago in Bonalikondo. He was such a very clever boy, he even used to teach many of us.”

The woman had been nodding as I spoke. Then as soon as I paused she said:

“So you are the man who used to teach him-eh?”

“No. I say he used to teach us. He taught me. If his father had enough money he too should have been a big man by now. I have just returned from Italy and I want to see if I can help him too to pass his exams in my house in Menako. I am from Menako, not Ovenga as you heard, mama...”

“They are the same, son. Menako and Ovenga. Is that not where the money-people and the white men stay?”

I smiled. I did not think it necessary to try to make any corrections about her conceptions. She went on:

“My daughter was talking to me about a white man who wants her man to go and stay in his house and learn. So you are the one-eh?”

“It was not a white man, mama, I was the one. What did Dennis say about it?”

“I say I know nothing, son.”

I told her a little more about myself and what I did. As soon as I mentioned the fact that I was a medical officer she completely forgot about the object of my visit and began to narrate her woes.

“As you see me like this, son, I have seen what nobody else on this soil has ever seen. Six times I carried a child in my womb, and six times have I given suck to a child. My own. Six times have I watched my child grow until he was beginning to become a man. And six times have I buried them. Six sons who ought to have buried me, I buried them. Me. Dying in broad day light like this, without saying ‘mama, I have headache.’”

I listened, speechless with pity for the woman.

“Now I am dying, without anybody to give me a drop of medicine. No man, no brothers, no sisters...”

“So how do you live, mama? How do you get food to eat and clothes to wear?”

“I say I am not living, son. I am dying. If God sends anybody and he sees me and takes pity on me and gives me one franc or an old rag, that is how I get something in my belly to go to the latrine. That is how I get something to cover this bark which I call my skin.”

I returned to the car where I took my stethoscope and some writing material from my brief case. I examined her very carefully and then wrote out some prescriptions for her. In addition I wrote a letter which I told her to take to a particular doctor in the neighbouring Kolom hospital the following day.

The old woman rose from where she had been sitting and fell on me and with tears streaming down her eyes began to thank and bless me gently and affectionately squeezing my hands, arms, chest and feet. She then stood back and enquired tearfully:

“Son, can I walk there?”

“You cannot walk there, mama, there are lorries...”

“Will they not ask me to pay money, son?”

I gave her 3,500 francs which included both the cost of the drugs and her fare to and fro. Then I sat down and wrote another letter for Dennis when I found that it was getting late and I could not wait any more.

Mbongo,
April 25th, 1970.

My dear Dennis,

I am somehow upset by what has just happened. I wrote to tell you that I would be coming to see you today at your office so that we could come home and discuss the issue I raised about trying to help you pass some exams. From every indication, you did get my letter

and you were very aware that I was coming here today. But you decided not to meet me. It really makes me feel ashamed of the offer I made. Did something in the letter offend you? I keep no duplicates of letters I write out to friends, but I am convinced that I wrote a kind letter and made a genuine offer to somebody like you who was once of such help to me. Or have you forgotten who it was that wrote? I would be most amazed if you have forgotten of me so soon.

But just in case that guess is right, I enclose here a passport photograph of myself just to remind you of whom I am. Age lines have certainly crept in, but I am sure it should tell you at once that it is your old childhood friend, the one you used to help so much in the primary school. I am seizing this opportunity to repeat my offer and to tell you that I am very sincere in my determination to help you, and I am very anxious to know how you feel about it. Write to me, care of the University Teaching Hospital.

Give your wife and children my kindest regards.

Yours sincerely,

Max.

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

Big mama was drinking beer when I came back. Drinking beer, Guinness even!. I always said that there was nothing that woman could not do. She saw me as I was passing and would not let me go.

“Where have you been today, my son, Dennis?” she asked from her veranda.

“I went to see my father. I took him to another medicine man in town. Anything big mama?” I asked.

She smiled very broadly and, holding up the remains of the beer, said:

“I am eating what has fallen from your bag. The man who used to teach you in school in Bonalikondo has come here to look for you. A young, shining man! You could put

a morsel of *fufu* on his face and swallow without asking for soup, and you will never be hungry again in your life. His car, like the whole of this town..."

"The man who used to teach me?"

"He was here," she said. "Look at the money he has given me..."

"He said he used to teach me?" I could not believe my ears.

"If you think I am lying, go to your house if you will not see a book under your door which he has written. A very nice man. Why did you not stay back to see him? He said..."

I turned away in sad silence and went back home. I now felt very justified in my refusal to meet Max. A classmate I used to teach had come to curse my peaceful life by wanting to prove that I, Dennis, was absolutely incapable of standing on my own. He believes that I, Dennis, was nothing, and that he would make me something. Because he, Max, is God. Because I, Dennis, had put it in the newspapers that I was starving, that I wanted to change the will of God. I have not accepted the offer. In fact, I had refused it in the only way possible. And there was Max, Dr. Maximillian Essemo Aleukwienchaa, advertising his virtues to every passer-by, every Tom, Dick and Harry.

It was true that Max had reached that sky that was once promised me, Dennis. It was true that I dared not look at Max now without sheltering my eyes. But why not speak the truth? Max, if his offer was kind, should not have written to me like that. He should have spoken the simplest honest truth to that old woman, one of the hundreds who would never believe or accept that I, Dennis, had ever been anything better in life than what she knew was true about me. He should have given me that most insignificant credit which is my due - that it was, in fact, I, that condemned Dennis Nunqam, who had once taught the man who had now become a God...

I forgot about the letter that was said to have been put under my door, knelt in the dusty veranda. I invoked the image of my long dead Head Master and begged:

“My Dear Mr. Ayomba, I am sorry. I am very sorry. But it was not my fault that I was not able to do anything answerable to what you honestly thought about me. The sky was my limit. Yes, it was. But I had to jump from this earth to which something outside me chained me. I jumped, Sir, I jumped. But I always fell back. And I always fell back, farther back than where I was before I tried to jump. I ran, dear Sir, but only to remain in the same spot.”

Chapter Four

*

Manda Chabeule

IF DENNIS ever said that it was because he wanted a new medicineman for his father that he had been absent from the house when Dr. Essemo came to look for him, as he claimed, know that it is a very fat lie. He himself decided not to go to work or remain at home to wait for Dr. Essemo. Whether he was reading the thing how, I don't know. But for him, the letter asking him to go to Menako was an insult. Something we all saw as a blessing from God.

I said I was not going to talk about it again. I mean talking about the day Dr. Essemo had said he was coming to Mbongo. But that date, the 25th April just remained in my heart like something, from the very minute I read the letter. I never stopped hoping that before the day finally arrived he shall have changed his mind and accepted to receive his friend our God.

The day before Dr. Essemo was to come down, he was preparing to go to work in the morning when I reminded him.

"Don't forget to leave something, Dennis, so that I go and get things for your friend's visit tomorrow."

He looked at me as if he did not know what I was talking about. When Dennis does not want to do something, you can say it a hundred times to him, he will not say he has heard anything.

"Have you forgotten that tomorrow is when he said he will come? Is tomorrow not April 25th?" I asked him.

He did not answer. He sat down at the table where he poured himself a cup of tea from the flask and drank and rose and went out without saying even *nyang* about it. When he returned in the afternoon I was standing in the veranda. He did not greet me. Why should I greet him too? I did not speak to him. He did not even look at me when I passed into the parlour. His lunch was supposed to be standing covered on the table where he took his meals at that time of the day. But I had not put anything on it. And I threw open the kitchen door so that he should see that there was no cooking going on anywhere in the house.

He pulled the old lounge chair his father had given him and sank into it and closed his eyes. I knew he was expecting me to say something about lunch. A few minutes later I came into the house and, standing in front of him, I said:

“Dennis, I want to ask you something and I want you to open your mouth and answer my questions.”

He opened his eyes gently and stared at me from where he was lying. I could see that he was not angry but perplexed and also ashamed. If he was angry he would have told me to go away. It looked like he did not know what to do with me. He rose and walked as if his feet were paining him and entered the room, our own room. I did not follow him.

I was even glad he was going to the room because I wanted him to see what I had done there. My large brown valise was on our bed. I had forced everything I could put inside, so that the lid could not close properly. I had even used my loin cloth to tie round across the middle of the box. On the valise was one of our old blankets which I carelessly folded and bound with a string to a carton that I also placed on the valise. The carton contained the children's clothing.

Nothing of mine was hanging from the nails on the wall or lying about as had always been the case. Even the pots and plates had been washed and put into a large basket that stood at the foot of the bed.

"Today is today," I told myself. If he did not want to receive his friend, he would have to tell me why. Very soon I heard him coming back outside. He came and, standing before me, asked:

"What is happening in this house like this, Manda?"

Me, answer him? I only asked my own question too. I asked:

"Dennis, what are the plans to receive your friends?"

"I have none, Manda, none," he told me. Sometimes I think Dennis is a stone.

"Why?"

"Is that why you have packed your things, Manda?"

"Yes," I answered, and then said:

"And if you don't say anything well about it, I will leave this house."

"Leave this house, Manda?"

"Yes."

"I have done nothing to send you out of this house, Manda," he said.

"You have, Dennis," I told him. "How can you be so wicked that you will not want to welcome somebody whom God has sent to come and save you and the whole family?"

He took in a very look breath, tried to speak but went and sat him down. Just like him. I began making like a madman, or a mad woman. A mad person. I threw my hands into the air and began pointing round the house:

"Look at the spider web you call house. It is only by the grace of God that it has not fallen to grind us all one day."

"Don't' give up, Manda," Dennis said like a pastor in church. "God has not stopped helping us."

"But even if he has not stopped, Dennis, we must try to help ourselves. We must..."

"Have I not been trying to help myself, Manda?" he asked.

Perhaps he thought he was talking to a stranger.

I told him what was on my mind:

"You have not, Dennis. You have not," I shouted. "God wants you to be somebody," I stopped talking and went into the room and within seconds returned with a bundle of old clothes which I scattered on the floor in front of him.

"Look at the rotten smelling rags you call clothes for children you are proud to call yourself their father..."

"Listen to me, Manda..." he tried to talk. But I went on. I wanted him to hear the way I was feeling.

"Look at your own clothes. If you died today, what do you think they will bury you with?..."

"When I was born I was wearing what?" he asked. "When I am dead you care don't bury me..."

"That was not what I was saying. I wanted you to see that we have nothing. Look at my clothes. Go in and look at the pigsty sticks we lie on, calling it our bed. Look at everything. What are we?"

"Poor people, Manda," he said in that his annoying way. "You have not discovered only today that our clothes and all our belongings are rotten, have you, Manda?"

"They have always been so, Dennis," I agreed. "But now God doesn't want them to be so any more. That is why he wants you to receive your friend he has sent to save you."

He rose and entered the house, stood at the door of our room for a few minutes, talking to himself. One thing I was never to forget about the letter from Dr. Essemo was that it made Dennis to begin to behave like his head was not correct. He soon returned out again and said:

"Manda, I beg you to understand that I cannot receive the offer Max has made. I beg you to understand that I cannot remain in this house when he is coming."

"Why? Is it because of the things you saw in the letter or you have some other reasons?"

“That reason alone is enough, Manda,” he said. “If you did not find anything wrong in that letter then I don’t think I can ever make you see why I don’t want to receive him.”

Whatever the reason he had for not wanting to receive his friend, I did not want to hear. I was determined to go away, and I wanted to see how his reasons would be more important for him than me and the children. He left the house and began to walk down

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

Whether people agree or not, I know that it was because of my father’s sickness that I was not in the house by the time Dr. Max was to come. It could not be denied that I had been telling Manda that I would not receive him. It is also true that even the day before he was being expected I was still arguing with Manda about it. But what really kept me away was Pa’s sickness.

I did not see how I could allow Manda to go away with my children. I did not see how I could allow Manda herself to leave me like that. There was some sense in what she was saying. Only that she refused to see my own point. But by the time I left the house to go down to town I was already thinking of how I was going to arrange to receive him. But I was hungry and needed a place to find something to be eating while thinking about the situation.

It was while I sat eating garri in a small bar down town that I got news of my father’s illness. Even the old men who knew him well had said my father, had suffered from frequent attacks of numerous physical ailments ever since he was a young man. There were moments when his buttocks and the soles of his feet were infested with yaws, he had an abscess on his back, rheumatism and piles. And this would

persist for months at a stretch, healing and then reappearing. He was not over seventy, plagued with every kind of sickness that age and poverty could cause.

From his sixtieth year his health had never given him a single day of rest. For the past two years he had been going from one medicine man to another without any real signs of improvement. He was now in Mokap, a village about twelve kilometres from Mbongo. He had once owned a small cocoa farm of about half an acre, and an oil palm bush of over five hundred palms which his father, my grandfather, handed down to him. But he had long sold both farms in order to provide the money to cure himself. Had my father taken my advice and gone to a hospital he would have saved himself or much money and, perhaps, he might never have been so sick for so long. But, like some of the old men in the tribe, he had very great fear of the white man's medicine, as they called the hospital drugs.

It was not just because such medicines cost a lot of money. Personally, Pa believed that doctors could never cure him. He shared with many other tribesmen the conviction that the hospital doctors were neither competent nor confident of their treatment. They say that was why in the hospital there was a special house for storing their victims – the dead.

Pa Ste's fear of the white man's medicine was genuine, and it sprang from an event that lay very deep in the history of the tribe. In the palace of the Paramount Chief of Bonalikondo, still hung a pair of scissors a German tailor had given the Chief during the First World War in exchange for volunteers to fight for the Germans. Several years afterwards the Chief developed an illness which diagnosis at the German Mobile Clinic proved to be appendicitis. He was operated upon and his life saved. But about a year afterwards a complication developed which led to a second operation. This time it was discovered that a tiny pair of pincers had been accidentally sewn up in his belly during the first operation.

The Chief died after that second operation, perhaps not because of it. But the news that a large pair of scissors had been forgotten inside him had already spread. Nobody really knew how the issues ever became confused, but for years afterwards, visitors to the palace went away believing or learning that the huge pair of scissors hanging over the door was the very one that had been removed from the Chief's belly, the very one that had caused his death. Pa Ste was one of those who, having seen it, had vowed not to be another victim of the white man's medicines.

After my meal I went by bus to see Pa.

"I have called for you, son, to take me to Bola-bola," he said. Before Pa was brought to Mokap about two months ago the medicine man had asked for his spittle in the white shell of a snail. It had taken us two months of intensive search to find such a shell, and when I had at last brought it to him the medicineman had consulted his spirits and then told Pa Ste:

"This sickness is as a jigger to me. I will take it out in no time."

I was therefore surprised that Pa was again asking to be taken to somewhere else. I asked him:

"Why do you want to leave here now, father? Did you not tell me that there was some improvement?"

"The medicineman told me that there was improvement. I said there was improvement. But there is no improvement. He has now told me that he does not know what he is curing. And I am not well, as you can see."

"And he has taken 11,000 francs?"

"That is true, son. Take me to Bolabola," my father said.

"When will that be?"

"If they can allow you in your work place then take me. what is today?"

"Wednesday, April 24, father," I told him.

“Ask that they should allow you to take me on Saturday.”

I looked down on him. I could not give my father’s request a second thought.

“I can take you there tomorrow, father,” I said.

“You will not work?” he asked.

“Well, I want to take you there first. I will ask for permission in the morning. Before you said it you knew that I work.”

*

I returned to Sabongari very late that evening. From the distance I saw no light in my house and when I came and opened the door I found that Manda had gone away with the children and her door belongings. How was I to leave my father dying?

Chapter Five

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

MANDA KNEW that she was bound to remain my wife for life. That one I could even swear to God. Where would her parents get money from to pay back the bride price we paid them if she wanted a divorce. That is why our women do not divorce. In packing out of the house, therefore, I knew that she only wanted some means of forcing me to welcome Max.

It was to my uncle, Pa Andre, that she went. That was their lawyer for anything that I did which they considered wrong. Unlike my father who never disagreed with me on anything I did, Pa Andre never spared me. According to him I have never grown too big to be flogged. He was a thorn in my flesh. I think it is important to know how far back this kind of cruelty towards me started, and why it only grew from bad to worse as the days went by.

When I was forced to abandon school after only two years in the Commercial College because of lack of fees, Pa Andre said I should go into the Price Control Institute. He gave his reasons.

“When you leave that school you are the one to go into the shops and say ‘Why are you selling this like this, or that like that?’ If you can make business with the trader and let him sell for the price he likes then in one month, if they put you through this door you won’t pass because of fat from the eggs you will eat. In one year people will be afraid to call your name only because of money that will enter your pocket from all sides.”

I did not tell him that I did not like the suggestion, that I was not interested in being so rich, that I was not anxious to eat eggs and that I did not want to be feared. Throughout the meeting I remained silent. The following week Pa Andre was told that I had started working in the bindery of the Presbyterian Mission Printing Press. I would never forget what he said, that:

“It is better for a man to be childless than to have something like this with a penis and beard that you call a man, but which has the bones, blood and brains of a woman. We all pray to have a boy so that he can take care of us while we live and bury us when we die, and continue to manage those we have left behind us as our fathers left to us. Look at Bako’s son who never went as far as this. Two years in Price Control! Now he has bought his father a bicycle, he has bought his mother a Singer Sewing Machine. They say he eats only fowls. They say in his house it is electricity that cooks food, washes his clothes and irons them. And why not?

“Is it not a curse to have a boy whom you will feed from childhood and even when he is supposed to stand on his own feet he still leans on you? Is it not a curse to have a boy who will kill you with worries of why he cannot take care of himself?”

When I want to be honest with myself, I admit that some of the things he said were reasonable and worth considering. What I hate is for somebody to say a good thing in the context of a curse. I hate to see people shouting over my head. And I always blamed him for that. I also blamed my father for surrendering my life into the hands of such a Jew.

His next grievance came over the issue of my marriage. It took him and the rest of the family three years to convince me to take a wife.

“At your age, you anus of a pig,” I remember him cursing me. “I had three wives and eleven children. Your father had you at eighteen. And here we are, begging you at twenty-six

to do something to save the blood of this family from ending at your door.”

My argument that I was not rich enough to maintain a family could not convince anybody because it was said that my father had nothing when he married my mother. Nobody wanted to listen to me when I said times had changed since they married our mothers. They called it the excuse of a weakling. One of the most embarrassing allegations was when my mother died. Pa Andre said my mother had died because I denied her the opportunity to wash my own child's excrement. Meaning that I had refused to get married and give her my child to take care of.

Then I went to jail. Jail? You would be baffled. But yes, jail, prison. I, Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem went to Prison. Now that you have heard, you should know how it all happened.

In April 1964 there was a Provincial Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Bonalikondo. I and my wife were living there then and for a long time I had been making a few thousand francs from time to time from making signboards for barbers and market women. I made some five paintings of local landscape and tribal dances which I took to the exhibition. Although I had never taken painting very seriously I won the first prize. Among people who liked my work, there was a Dutch tourist who bought all five of the paintings and even followed me to my house to see some of the sketches I told him I had. There, in the house, the tourist found over twenty pieces of work which, if retouched, could fetch plenty of money, according to him. He suggested to me that I could make a big name for myself if I applied and staged an exposition of my works at the American Cultural Centre in Ovenga. He told me that he lived in Ovenga and that if I was interested he would, on his return, contact the Cultural Affairs Officer on my behalf.

I agreed. The man kept his word and within a month I assembled a good collection of paintings. The following month I left for Ovenga where I mounted a two-week Art Exposition at the American Cultural Centre. At the end I made 250,000 francs profit. But even more than that, the quality of my works had caused so much excitement among the visitors that before I returned to Bonalikondo I was told that the American Government had placed a scholarship at the disposal of my home government for a young artist to go aboard and study art in an American institution. I returned from Ovenga with forms for a medical examination which was a clear indication that my chances were very bright. I learned that I was the only candidate, and there was only one scholarship. I completed the medical examination formalities as requested within a few weeks and returned them to the Embassy as I had been instructed. Upon receipt of the result of the medical examination which the Embassy said was satisfactory I was informed that all further transactions concerning the scholarship had been handed over to the Ministry of Information and Culture. There, I was given forms to take to the Immigration Department in Ovenga which gave passports and visas. There I filled forms, gave in four passport photos, and 25,000frans fiscal stamps, and was told to report back in a week.

My scholarship to the United States became the talk of the town. At that time I was working with the Presbook Printing Press in Bonalikondo. When the manager of the press heard of the scholarship he called me to confirm. He loved my work the most amongst all his workers. I was always punctual and very serious in my duties. He told me that he did not want my place in the Press to remain vacant so I should let him know well in advance if I was leaving them. He asked me to do so in writing. Had I done so the document might have been sent to Ovenga as a proof that I didn't want the scholarship. I did not write. I resigned. I

began to make arrangements of how my wife would join me in the United States after I had gone away. Then, out of the excitement of going abroad I even threw many of the send-off parties myself. There was the money, and I liked to see people enjoy when I was happy. Not me. Not then.

After a week of anxious expectation I returned to Ovenga as I had been told to do. My things had long been packed ready for the final departure as soon as the passport was ready. In Ovenga I was told to return after a week. I returned to Bonalikondo and later came back to Ovenga again. A trip from Bonalikondo to Ovenga cost, 5,000 francs. I made eight trips to Ovenga, wasting almost half the money I had made from my art exposition.

Then I discovered that nobody wanted to see me either at the Immigration or the Ministry of Information and Culture. Returning to the Cultural Affairs Officer with whom I had originally discussed the award at the American Embassy, I was told that some other person had long left the country in my place. They said they learned that I had rejected the offer. The person who had gone in my place was the daughter of the brother of the uncle of the Minister of Information and Culture himself.

That was what wiped laughter from my face and from my life. I went back to Bonalikondo. Even many of those who had been drinking with me only helped to make the wound deeper. I overheard one saying one day:

"I was even wondering how the government will leave engineers and doctors to give scholarships to somebody to go and do drawing."

That was wicked because the man said it knowing that I would hear him. And he was one of those who had been praising me for developing such great talent on my own as to earn a scholarship to deepen my knowledge of art. I would have killed myself. But somebody saved me, one of the guests who had attended the exposition. I would like to

say she saved me. She had bought some of the paintings and had been very glad to hear that I had been given the opportunity to develop my talents abroad. Later when the plans failed she had also met me. She was called Miss Shirley Glad. She said she came from Ireland, and planned to return to Britain soon. She so sympathized with me that she promised to help finance my studies in an Art School in Britain if I could get my travelling papers and pay half the fare.

I began to make my plans. But it was all in secret. I wanted to go to Britain so bad that I was ready to do anything. Nobody meant anything to me any more, not even my wife, child or father. I told myself that if I succeeded and got there and wrote back to explain why I had acted in secret, they would forgive me. As I said, I told nobody. I say *nobody*. That means, not even my wife.

One day I left the house with my handbag that I was going to patch clothes in town. For two weeks nobody saw me. Nobody heard about me. Some people at home thought I had died. Then they heard that I was arrested and locked up. Relatives and friends came together to mourn for me when news came to Manda that I had been caught and imprisoned for attempting to enter Britain without the necessary documents.

I was in Komen-dor prison. That very week Manda came to see me. But she was denied permission because I had claimed that I had no wife, no father, no brother, no mother, no sister and no friends anywhere in the world. She was, however, told by the prison authorities that I had acquired a false passport, had stolen across the border and fled to London with an Irish woman. Arriving at Heathrow airport we had been stopped and interrogated.

Miss Glad turned out not to be as strong as she had thought. The situation became more complicated than we had thought. When the British Immigration refused to issue me an entry visa, she went up to our Embassy and informed the Ambassador, in the hope that he would intercede. It

was when the Ambassador came in that I discovered that the passport that I had bought was not a valid one. The Ambassador of my country had been called in to whom I had failed to explain why I had left the country without an exit visa.

I no longer recalled what I said, but when it had become obvious that I would not be allowed into Britain I had insulted the Ambassador and the entire government of the country. Nobody knew what the Ambassador said in the message he sent back home, but, first, I was deported. Miss Glad left the airport when it was being said that she was aiding an illegal immigrant into Britain. I never heard about her again.

Before I reached home information had long been received that I had insulted the state. My trial lasted thirty minutes, and I admitted everything they said against me. I just wanted them to lock me up and never release me, or to kill me and throw me away. I did not have any value any more. Had I succeeded to enter Britain my people would have forgiven me. But when it failed I knew that I would not mean anything to my wife, children, father, and the like, I was sentenced to five years imprisonment, with hard labour. I served one whole year and then an amnesty from the head of state freed me. That was where I met Mossah. Sometimes when I sat like this and did things which surprised people, it was not madness. The things which had happened to me had not happened to anybody else.

Manda pardoned me. So also did my father. But not Pa Andre. In his view, that imprisonment was punishment from God for taking my responsibilities so lightly as to attempt to abandon my family in pursuit of a white woman. It was being said that the woman and myself were planning to get married. In point of fact, I was desperate. If she offered marriage to me at that time I would not have refused, if only that would enable me to enter Britain and do a course in art.



Manda Chabeule

When I saw that Dennis would not come I decided to go me away as I had told him. I took the two children and went straight to Pa Andre. I left them there because Pa Andre was not in the house and went to Mokap to report to Pa Ste. I did not even know that Dennis had gone there. When I told Pa Ste he made as if he and Dennis had arranged it. He said to me:

“Manda, I will tell you again, that if you have anything with your husband, you lock your door and ask: ‘Massa, what have I done, why do you make me so?’ Never let anybody hear that your husband snores in the night...”

“Even you, papa? That I should hide things from you?” I asked him.

“Even me, Manda,” he said. “I am outside your house. Who else had heard this?”

“Nobody,” I lied. I could not tell him that I have complained to people.

“Good, go back and meet your husband,” he told me. “If he says *no* to anything, it is *no* for all of you. He is the man who has that house.” He then told me that Dennis planned taking him to another medicineman the following day, and that he would ask Dennis about the thing when he came the next day for him. That was when I knew that Dennis had come there. But he was not talking as if Dennis had told him about Dr. Essemo’s coming. He may have just complained that I was not obeying him. I did not want to dwell on the visit because it would look like I was not taking his illness seriously. I went back to Pa Andre’s place, but planned to return to Pa Ste the following morning at the time that Dennis had promised to come and take him to go and see the medicineman.

Early that morning I was there. I was there before Dennis. Pa Ste spoke to Dennis in my presence. He told Dennis:

“Son, your wife came to tell me that you have done something which she did not like. Son, how we have lived and where we have lived is not the best way. The best way is up. If somebody ever throws you a rope to lift you from down there to better life, don’t spit on it. And don’t let it stand between you and your wife.”

I was glad that even his own father saw that what I was doing was correct. Dennis could not say anything. Now that even his own father had turned against him, supporting what we all wanted, I was going to see what he would do. When I heard him saying: “I will try father,” I knew that we had won the case. Even if we were not going to see the Dr. Essemu that day, the whole thing was not going to be lost. Whether he was agreeing just because he was afraid to increase his father’s sickness, I don’t know.

That morning, especially, he kept telling me that they would return in good time to see Dr. Essemu. I knew that was not possible because no arrangements had been made. Besides, they left just around twelve noon.

When Pa Andre returned later in the night of the day that I escaped to his house, saw my children and listened to me explain why I had left my husband’s house he said:

“This madness must stop. There is an evil spirit in his head. That is what is causing all the madness. We will tie his hands and feet and take him to the medicineman and pay him to wash him with cleansing herbs. But first, let us wait until we hear that the docta has come and gone back.”

I slept with them that night, went and saw Pa Ste again in the morning as I said before. In the evening when Pa Andre returned from working in his farm the two of us together with the children went to Sabongari to find out whether Dr. Max actually came.

It was to Big Mama who lived near our house that we first enquired. The woman did not wait for Pa Andre to say why he had come before telling us the thing that we missed.

"He was the son of God himself," she began talking about Dr. Essemo. You know how Big Mama always says or see her own things!

"If you know what the skin of a child who has just come out of the womb looks like, you should not ask me how his was. Every single word that fell out of his lips was only goodness. His clothes, I call them clothes because they covered his body. I would have called them money, for I think it was only money that they sewed together and gave him to wear."

She went into the folds of her old loin cloth and took out the remaining portion of the money that she said had been given to her to be buying her medicines and beer.

"See what he left in my palm when I shook his hands. I mean what was in his palm, not in his pocket. If he had put his hand into his pocket, I should not have had anywhere to keep it. Poor me, what can I do with money like that?"

She brought out the letter Dr. Max had written for her to take to the hospital and asked me to read it. I had not even opened it when the woman went on:

"The car that came with him inside! I think it is what flies in the sky because it does not look like something to travel on this dirty earth. He sat here in this dirty house of mine and told me all about my son, Dennis. He was the one who used to teach Dennis long time ago in school. Then he was asked to go to the white man's country and teach them. Now that he has come back he wants to teach Dennis again. Is that not a good thing?"

How could me or Pa Andre answer? We were only thinking about what we had missed and what we might miss again unless we were very careful. The fact that Dr. Essemo had actually come and gone back without seeing us, and the fact that he was such a very good and rich man, made us to close our mouth in our anger against Dennis. I asked:

“Did you tell Dennis, mama?”

“As soon as he came back.”

“And what did he say? He said what made him not to wait to see the doctor?”

“What could he say, my daughter?”

“And the doctor, mama, what did he say when he could not see Dennis?”

“To tell the truth, my daughter, he was not glad. He wrote a letter which he put under your door.”

At this point Pa Andre burst out of the house and started walking furiously towards our house. I ran after him and when I caught up with him I held him and asked where he was going to.

“To beat sense into the head of the goat,” he said. “Are you not hearing what he has done?”

“Don’t do so, father,” I pleaded.

Whenever things begin to happen to me like this I try to think about how to help myself. While we were coming to Sabongari that evening something came to my head. I thought of how I could solve the problem and still remain in the house as the wife of my husband, and not look like a bad woman to him. I told Pa Andre:

“Let me just go back and sleep in the house with my husband this night, father. Let me hear what he is thinking. Then tomorrow I will tell you what I have done. I think I can still make Dr. Essemu to come here again.”

Pa Andre was not sure how I was going to do it, but he decided to postpone his punishment of Dennis until I had carried out my plan. That same night I was escorted back to our house with the two children.

Dennis was already asleep when we came knocking at the door. He woke and when he opened the door and found that it was me his face changed. He even smiled, meaning that he was really glad that we had come back. Perhaps he thought that as Dr. Essemu had come and gone back that was the end of the palaver.

He greeted Pa Andre and stood looking at him. I think he was expecting Pa Andre to curse him or do something of the sort. Or ask him to explain why he had done what he had done. I am sure he had already prepared to answer because he knew that I had gone to Pa Andre, and that Pa Andre would surely come to the house at any time.

Pa Andre did not answer. I think that worried him. He took in my valise and then carried the younger boy in his arms. As soon as we all had entered the house Pa Andre bade me and the boys goodnight and went away without saying a word to Dennis. I know that Dennis did not think that he had really gone away.

For about five minutes not a single word passed between Dennis and myself. I went into the room where I untied my things and began hanging them back on the ropes and nails on the walls. Then returning to the parlour I asked:

“Dennis, how do you feel now about what has happened? How do you feel now that your friend has come and gone away without seeing you?”

He sighed heavily and said:

“Manda, I beg you to sit down. Please sit down and let me talk to you.”

I did not sit down. I did not know why each time you wanted to talk to him or ask him something he would ask you to sit down. I went into the room to rearrange my things. After I had finished doing so I went and sat on the bed in the room. He took a chair and came in and put it down, facing me. He stood behind the chair for a while and then stepped forward to sit down.

“You have not come to disturb the children, Dennis? The children need sleep, they are very tired,” I said.

“But I want to talk to you, Manda.”

I did not respond. He carried the chair back to the parlour and sank into his lounge chair. About fifteen minutes later I returned to join him. I stood by the table and asked:

“What were you saying, Dennis?”

“Sit down, Manda,” he told me.

I sat on the chair which he had brought back from the room, looking directly into his face.

“Manda I want you to understand,” he began, “that it is not everybody who goes about naked that is a madman. I want you to understand that I know how important it is for us to live a better life. I want you to understand that I know that for you to have packed out of our house with our children because I would not welcome Dr. Essemo, is a sign that you really care for our lives. But I want you to also understand that there is something in the whole thing which you are not seeing at all. Something. Something, Manda.”

“Dennis,” I said, “I don’t know what you are saying, but let me tell you that there is nothing in it which I have not seen. You are seeing something where there is nothing.” He rose and went into the room and brought out the letter which Dr. Essemo had left under our door.

“Take this letter and read it very well, Manda,” he said.

I opened it and read through very carefully.

“Did Big Mama tell you what Dr. Essemo said to her about our past lives?” he asked.

“She did,” I said. “But what is wrong with this letter?”

I asked him. “Surely something is wrong with your eyes, Dennis.”

“Something is wrong with your eyes, Manda,” he said.

“Something is wrong with your ears too. Did Big Mama not tell you how Dr. Essemo said he used to teach me in school?”

“She did,” I said. “But that should make you only happier and proud, Dennis,” I told him.

“It should make me ashamed, Manda. This man is making a ridicule of my life. He has gone and told the world that he used to teach me, because he knows that he what will give him prestige. Because he knows that is what will make people continue to spit on me. Then he has written down

the truth, knowing that none of those people to whom he has spoken those lies will ever come to ask me to read the letter.

“Look at the picture he has put in here. Who told him that I have not seen enough handsome and healthy looking people? Who told him that I wanted to compare my face with his own? Was I preparing for an Agric Show?”

“Dennis, you are seeing everything upside down,” I said. Then I asked him: “How can we be sure that what she said was what your friend said? If I were you I should only be annoyed if the man wrote it down that he used to teach you when in fact you used to teach him. Read that letter again and you will really see that he wants to help us all...”

He said to me that even if he read the letter one thousand times, he didn’t think we shall ever see the thing from the same angle.

I sat me quiet. I had tried my best. What else could I say? But I had my plans. The following day when he had gone to work I took up my pen and wrote this letter to Dr. Essemu:

C/o Mrs. James Ako
Domestic Science Centre,
Mbongo, S.W. Province,

26th April, 1960

My dearest Dr. Maximillian Essemu.

I know that you will be very surprise to see this letter because you did not know before that your friend is married. Doctor, I am writing to apologize to you for what my husband did to you and to try and understand what is happening. We knew that you were coming, but my husband your friend did not want to wait for you. He thought that we are too poor to welcome a man like you to the kind of place where we live. I tried to convince him to stay but he said we must leave the house. Doctor, I am writing to beg you not to give up wanting

to help your friend because if you help him you are helping the whole family and the whole world. We have two children and he does not get a lot of money, so we think that it was God who sent you to want to help him.

Doctor, I am just begging you in the name of God to try and come one day again. If you think that you can ever come here again, please I beg you to try and reply this letter in the above address and tell me the day. I will not tell him, but I will make sure that he is at home. If you meet him at home like that and talk to him, I know he will not continue to deny to help himself. Please Doctor, try and reply,

*Yours Sincerely,
Manda Nunqam.*

Chapter Six

*

Manda Chabeule

DR. MAXIMILLIAN replied to my letter the very same day he got it.

Dear Mrs. Dennis:

Thank you very sincerely for your letter of April 26th. I must tell you that it came as great relief to my feelings. As you must have heard by now, your husband and myself were such good friends in the primary school days that I feel most uncomfortable when I think of the way he is living. I was convinced that he would not hesitate if some old friend like myself offered him an opportunity which would make him lead a better life.

But when after writing to him I came down and did not find him, I was actually embarrassed. I am still as willing as ever to help him, madam. At the hour of writing, I have just received a notice to the effect that I might go down to the South West Province towards the end of this month and by the beginning of June I should be in Kolom.

This implies that I might be able to come to Mbongo again as you suggested. Your idea sounds good and shows great concern for your family circumstances. But I would like to add that I will not compel him. If he is unwilling to be helped, there is not much I can do. Tentatively, Sunday, June 6, looks like the day I can be in Mbongo. But I will write again to confirm.

Give everybody my regards.

Maximillian Essemo.

I had visited Pa Andre after writing to Dr. Essemo and I had told him about it. When I received the reply to my letter I went to him again. The two of us sat down together in one place and planned how we were going to welcome Dr. Essemo. The two of us agreed that Dennis must not be informed about the visit, otherwise he would escape again.

Pa Andre was to treat Dennis as more and more kindly as he could. He was to come to the house early the Sunday morning that Dr. Essemo was to come. He was to hold Dennis in a long conversation or something like that which would make it hard for him to leave until Dr. Essemo came.

In the meantime, we were going to buy drinks and preserve in town. Then, at the end of the visit, whether he liked it or not, we were all going to force him to return with Dr. Essemo to Menako. Yes, that was our plan. We were not going to sit back and see our good luck just fly away like that.

Everything went as we planned until the second day of June, four days before Dr. Essemo was going to come. It just looked like God did not really want Dennis to meet his friend at all. That day a message came to Dennis that his father's illness had become worse and that the old man wanted to see him very quickly.

Dennis left Mbongo that very day to go and see him. But his going did not change the plans we made to receive Dr. Essemo.

Something too had happened again that made our people anxious to meet Dr. Essemo: a letter had come to us two days after he had gone to see his father. The Central Co-operatives Agency had finally decided to remove Dennis from work. He was not the only one, several others had suffered the same. The reasons were that the Corporation no longer had enough money to pay all the workers under them. I had read the letter and had explained to Pa Andre. It was now certain that if he, Dr. Essemo came, he was going to return with Dennis.

I rented an arm chair from a shop in town for 500 francs. Pa Andre bought a carton of beer and a bottle of Teachers Whisky. By the morning of Sunday June 6 everything had been arranged in our house in a manner which we believed was good enough for a person like Dr. Essemu, according to the small means we had. Pa Andre advised that we should not spend too much in the welcome party because we wanted to show Dr. Essemu how poor we were, not how rich.

Only five people first made the suggestion to receive Dr. Essemu. Pa Andre, his wife, my uncle and his aunt and me. On Saturday the number had increased to eleven, and by the time Dr. Essemu really appeared there were about twenty people waiting for him.

We started by waiting for him on the veranda after twelve o'clock, as this was the hour Dr. Essemu said he was going to be arriving. After about an hour or so of waiting, when we saw nobody coming, we started walking down the road, hoping every second that we were going to see him coming up.

At 4 o'clock exactly, when we were already more than one whole kilometre from the house, a blue car was seen in the long distance. There was very much relief, because everybody knew the car from the colour I described to them.

But he did not stop. He just passed us at top speed. We all stood there silent, like when people who have been hearing stories about devils in the middle of the night suddenly hear a knock on the door. I stood, almost turning into a stone with shame because all eyes were on me. I had really shouted "Doctor! Doctor! Doctor!" as the car was passing us. It almost jammed the very first man who stepped down the road to try to stop it. The other relatives were also dying of shame. Especially because many of them were already talking to the strangers who joined us that Dr. Essemu was also our relative.

“Did you say he was the one?” Somebody asked as if I had lied.

“You mean that he is who?” Pa Andre asked. “Have you ever seen such a car on this road before?”

“And he just passed like that?” another relative asked. It was me who threw in some cold water.

“Maybe he did not know that it was us,” I told Pa Andre who immediately seized this explanation and repeated it several times to the others.

*

Maximillian Essemole Alekwieunchaa

The windows of my car wound up, my radio cassette playing loud as usual, I drove up the rough road with the same inattention that I had passed hundreds of drunken revellers on my way to Mbongo that Sunday. Little did I notice that I had passed my hosts by. My goal was the little house at the end of the abandoned road, the little house where my wonderful friend lived.

Though I was coming down with the same intention of helping him, this time my mind was already made up. I was not ready to be made a fool twice. Since his wife had written to do all the explaining, they ought to be at home. If I met the door locked again, caput. They would never hear of Max again.

That thought was erased from my mind in a hurry when I noticed from the distance that the little door was open. I drove up into the yard and found myself some parking spot at the lower section of the compound where the canopy of the gigantic trees provided some shade from the blazing sun. I walked up to the open door and knocked. There was no sign of anybody inside. I leaned forward and looked into the parlour, anxious to see exactly what kind of life they led.

It looked clean and tidy but there was enough evidence that it was a poor home. Two narrow windows, literally holes in the walls, opened into the parlour, one to the back and the other to the front. A heavy musty and unhealthy odour issued gently from inside and hit my nose.

I thought the house smelt like a mortuary. The floor was hard earth, but had once been cemented; I could see patches of outworn cement sticking stubbornly in the areas closest to the walls. The walls too were plastered with cement and had been painted with whitewash. Whole sections of the plaster had fallen off, exposing the mud and bamboo skeleton on which it had been daubed. Every corner of the house had been carefully swept, but I had the sad impression that it was generally not a clean house. For one thing, there were far too many objects lying about for me to believe that they were always lifted and the places where they stood, kept constantly clean.

While I still stood looking round the house a boy rode to the compound on a bicycle and stopped.

"They say I should tell you that they are there, sa," he said.

"They who?"

"Auntie Manda and the people."

"Where?"

"Down near the main road, sa. They are coming."

"Leave your bicycle on the veranda there," I suggested, and come with me to where they are."

"Is Dennis there?"

"Everybody is there, sa. I tink he is there."

We both drove back down in the car. There was great excitement among the people, I could see. But they looked guardedly jubilant, perhaps they thought I would ignore them again and pass. They saw that the boy they had sent was also in the car.

From the distance I could tell even without being told by the boy, who Dennis's wife was. A smallish, cheerful-looking woman had shot out of the crowd and was almost trying to halt the car with the sheer force of her open hands. And as soon as I stepped out of the car she fell on me, almost weeping with joy, saying at the top of her voice:

"Doctor, welcome. Welcome, doctor. I am Manda. I am your friend's wife."

I was elated by the woman's warm-heartedness. But as I held her against my chest and searched among the crowd there did not seem to be any face there that bore resemblance to my friend's.

"Thank you, madam," I said. "I am very pleased to meet you. I am very pleased indeed. But where is my friend?"

"He is not here, doctor," she announced. "His father was very sick again. Very serious even, so he took him to Bola, Bolabola."

"His father?" I hoped that it was not a made up story.

"Yes, doctor. They went after yesterday. Four days now."

"B-o-l-a?"

"Yes, doctor. Bolabola."

"But he should have written to me about the illness. There is no hospital in Bolabola."

"They went to see a medicineman, doctor."

I shook my head imperceptibly. I knew from experience that it was not easy to change the people's minds to abandon traditional medicines. Seeing that I would only disconcert them by asking too many questions so soon I changed the topic at once.

"So, madam, these are your people not so?"

"Yes, doctor," Manda resumed and went on breathlessly to introduce them:

"This is my father, doctor. This is your friend's uncle, doctor, This is my sister, and your friend's uncle's wife..."

I embraced the first two people.

“Doctor, you passed us here,” Manda began again. “We shouted and shouted for you to stop but you...”

“I think that was very stupid of me, Madam. Sometimes I am very stupid indeed the way I drive. I did not even expect that while waiting for me you could come right down here. And you know that I did not know you, Madam. But I really see that it is my fault. I should at least have stopped.”

I did not want to say I usually drive at breakneck speed, that when I am driving at that pace and my cassette recorder was playing the way I had turned it, I was usually blind to any sight and deaf to any sounds not directly in my way.

“No, doctor, don’t blame yourself like that,” she pleaded. “It is my fault. We should have remained in the house. We should not have left. We did not even know when we got here...”

I suggested that we should return to the house at once.

“Arrange them into two or three groups, Madam. Your people. I will first take six people. I should make three trips.”

Somebody said something from the rear of the group which I missed, but I saw that it had sparked off a brief argument.

“What is happening, madam?”

“They say they will walk to the house, doctor.”

“Walk? Why? Nobody is walking. Let me give everybody a ride. The car is big enough, and there is enough petrol in it.”

Manda was standing very close to me. She beckoned to three people who were nearest us. They took about three steps and then somebody said something again from the rear which made them halt.

“Are they insisting on walking back home, Madam?”

“They asked whether they will pay, doctor,” she said.

“My goodness! How can they think of paying? Let them come in. Tell them it is their car.”

As I said so I took those who were close to me by the hand and let them into the car. When it was full I drove off, asking the rest to wait for me. Then I warned jokingly:

“If I come back and see anybody on the road going to the house we shall not take him into the car.”

They all laughed and before I returned for the second trip the tension that my eminent presence had built in them had eased considerably. They would very gladly have opened up conversation with me, but for the man Mrs. Dennis had introduced as Pa Andre. I heard that in my absence he made them understand that it was a blessing for them to be in the company of somebody who had come to dig their son from the grave and make him live again. He had therefore warned that they should not stretch their luck too far. They were not to make me believe that they are already taking me for their equal by speaking to me without being asked to do so. After the last trip, I parked my car and came into the house.

Manda and some relatives had modified the sitting order from what I saw when I first drove up to the house. A large armchair which I had not seen before had been placed at a respectable distance, facing the rest of the chairs. A small table had been positioned in the centre of the floor, a sparkling white cloth draping it like a shroud. A vase of already wilting flowers – a mixture of red roses and white lilies – stood like the veriest wreath upon a coffin in the centre of the table. A carton of beer was placed on the small central table, a bottle of Whisky on a stool in front of the stately seat.

“This chair is for doctor,” Manda told me reverentially.

I looked at the chair with its bright yellow cushions, polished mahogany legs and formica arms and said very politely:

“It’s alright, madam. Let me sit anywhere else...”

“Oh no, doctor. Do not do like that. We brought this only for you. There is nobody else who can sit on it....”

“Of course there is, madam,” I said looking into the faces of the old men who seemed to be very disturbed by my refusal.

“It is your chair, docta,” Pa Andre and Manda’s uncle said at the same time.

“No, my fathers. Let one of you sit on it. You are all our fathers. You require more comfort than I do. I can even remain standing...”

“Eh-eh, doctor!” Manda cried in protest. “Stand, doctor? O.K. Pa Andre, you sit there. Doctor, sit where you want now.”

They all waited until I had chosen my seat before they sat down. Manda immediately transferred the stool with the Whisky on it to where I was sitting and attempted to turn the cover open. I placed my hand on hers and said:

“Just one moment, madam. Wait a bit. I do not like denying everything you want to do for me, but I don’t think we have much to be happy about.”

At this juncture Pa Andre rose to the centre of the floor and spoke:

“Docta, we know that you have no time, so we shall not hold you. We have come here today to salute you and to thank you for the kind heart which you have shown to the whole world that you have. We have also come to make you know that we still have our eyes to see, even if our child, your friend has gone blind.

“We thought that God had forgotten of this our broken house, but you have made us to see that He had not. And how so? It is so because He had made people like you who are the sun, moon and stars of this nation, to think of taking food with your own hand and putting into the mouth of your own friend, our child. It is so because you know that by himself he is nothing. Docta, this thing that you have asked to do is very good at all.

“When you sent a book to your friend, our daughter told us that he refused to send the answer to tell you that ‘yes’ he saw your own. When you came down here to see him, he locked his own house and ran away. Docta, you see that there is something which is not correct with that your friend?”

I nodded gently.

“Docta, we too know that he is not correct and we want you to see that you have brought a walking stick to somebody whose two legs can no longer stand on their own. This is a big thing. Docta, this is a very big thing and I thank you from the bottom of my heart and from my brothers’ and sisters’ own bottom.”

I looked round, I was not alone because everybody else was nodding.

“Your friend is not here today. He had taken my brother to see a docta. Another docta. When our daughter said it up the road our eyes saw your own and we saw that you were not happy. And how happy? If your friend was a man who knows his left from his right, is it another person who should tell him what kind of medicine you can give to somebody you know is his father?”

“No,” the others answered.

“Sorry very much, docta. Docta we got a book from his work place yesterday evening that he has been sacked from work.”

Here he paused and asked Manda to bring the letter and show it to me. She went into the room and returning, she gave it to me. I opened it and read. It was a very brief note to the effect that Dennis’ appointment had been terminated because the company did not have enough money anymore to pay its workers.

“Docta, we want to promise you,” Pa Andre resumed, “that although your friend is not here now, we shall send him to you. We will bring him to you and we here, we give

you the power as his fathers and mothers that you should beat him even right on his bottom if he makes any nonsense - until he can be able to..."

Here Pa Andre suddenly stopped talking. He was facing the door and as he spoke he lifted up his head and looked outside. Everybody rose to the edge of their seats and stared out with the same bewilderment as Pa Andre. I rose, since my chair was backing the door, and looked in the direction of a lonely figure I could hardly recognize. The man was holding a brown leather handbag. I was forced to ask the reason for the consternation in everybody's eyes. I turned to Manda who was standing next to me and enquired.

"What is happening, madam? Who is it?"

"Is that not your friend, doctor? Have you forgotten him? It is Dennis, doctor."

I went to the veranda and stood looking at him as he approached the house. I was surprised that my friend should have become so old so soon, so withered.

"Where is his father?" one of the people asked.

"That is what I am waiting for him to come and tell me,"

Pa Andre said.

He apparently did not see the car until he entered the compound, since it was parked under a tree. I expected that upon seeing it he would suspect that I had come. Indeed he saw the car, and indeed he suspected that I had come. But his reaction to the presence of the car was, to say the least, stunning.

It was not that I expected him to run about in excitement. But he just threw a glance at it and passed with the same indifference that he could have confronted any of the old pillars that supported his crumbling house.

The expression on his face did not change when, upon looking at the veranda, he could see me smiling and waiting anxiously for him. Then as soon as he was near the veranda, I stepped down to meet him. There were moments when we did very funny things to each other and I think Dennis may not have forgotten them.

“Bo, Dennis!” I exclaimed, opening my hands to engulf him in a very warm embrace.

He raised a pair of poor sunken, spectral eyes and looked at me and then dropped his head at once as if to look continuously at me was to invite the world to compare the two faces. Definitely frightened, full of self-reproaching shame, indignant at what now looked like a conspiracy of the entire world against his person, against his freedom to make a choice and stand by it, he stretched his hand for what perhaps he felt was the safest thing that should come from a wretch like himself - a handshake.

I brushed aside his outstretched hand and seized his cold and almost lifeless body and embraced it. There was nothing of that tickling feeling of old. He could not resist the embrace as he might have liked to do.

“It’s such a long time, Dennis!” I said pressing him harder against my chest.

“Hmm,” he breathed out sharply.

“One would think it’s a whole century you know, bo, Dennis?”

“Hmm,” he breath out again.

I relaxed my embrace and standing back exclaimed:

“Bo Dennis, how are you really?”

“Hmm, well,” he said in his throat. I placed my right hand tenderly on his left shoulder and said:

“I am really so glad to see you once more, bo Dennis.”

I was just about to embrace him again when I thought I noticed a tear rolling down his right cheek.

“Bo Dennis, what is wrong?” I enquired looking very worriedly into his face like an adult would do to an infant who is afraid to disclose the cause of an affliction.

He said nothing. I studied his face more closely. I could not by any stretch of the imagination understand what confrontations he could have had with life so soon that his face had become hardened and lined to the extent. A mouth

that I still remembered very well, seemed to have been made for nothing else but smiling. It was now turned downwards, almost permanently downwards.

"Bo Dennis, what exactly is wrong?" I asked.

"My father has died," he said.

"Died?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Ovenga."

At that moment, Pa Andre and the rest of the family who had been watching, perhaps to see how he would react to my presence rose suddenly to the veranda. There, Pa Andre asked:

"Docta, what thing has he said?"

"He says his father has died."

"Where is the body?" He looked across at me, then at Pa Andre. One of the relatives who still stood in the house said almost to himself:

"You know how this our child does his own things. Don't be surprised if he has buried him."

Pa Andre picked this up and said as if to sympathize with him:

"If you have buried him, let us know."

Dennis did not talk. But the old man's face, as I watched, had suddenly contorted with unfathomable rage. He walked up to Dennis and gripping him by the shoulders in both hands, shook him vigorously.

"Am I talking to a stick? Are there stones in your ears?"

Answer me. Have you buried your father?"

"Yes I have," he said almost in a fit of anger.

"What? That you have done what to my brother?"

Dennis did not answer. The old man seized him by the collar and, pushing him back and forth, shouted:

"You this mad thing, where have you kept my brother? You say who has buried him? You have at last killed and buried my brother like a fowl, not so, you this empty thing?"

I patted him on the shoulder and was just about to tell him not to react in that manner when Dennis admitted:

“Yes, I have killed and thrown him away. So what?”

Swift as lightening, he withdrew his right hand from Dennis’ collar, swung it far back and slapped Dennis flat in his face. Before he could tell what was happening, the man followed the blow with a kick to his belly as Dennis staggered backwards.

I stepped between them and seized the old man’s hands.

“You cannot do this kind of thing, father,” I said. “There is a better way of solving this problem.”

“Docta, with this thing that is standing here like this, there is no better way to treat it. He has only to be beaten.. docta. Do you know what he has done? Burying his own father alone? The sons of our tribe are never buried outside the village.

“Docta, the sons of our tribe are never buried outside the village. This THING knows that very well...” I understand, sir, but listen...” I tried to explain something to him.

Dennis did not allow me to finish. He soon recovered from the effect of the blows, and he may have been looking at Pa Andre from the corner of his eye and, seeing him defenceless in my hands, sprang from where he had been standing and shot his right foot in the man’s groins.

Pa Andre fell through the door into the parlour, crashing on the bottles of beer which Manda had just set on the table. Dennis tried to leap at him in the house and fight it out to the end, but I seized him from behind. By the time Pa Andre was lifted from where he had fallen, his hands too were held tightly behind him, making it hard for him to continue to fight. He was an old man, but it took a real effort to hold him back from continuing the fight. They shouted insults at each other and it took fifteen minutes before things became calm again.

But some damage had been done: my spectacles were broken, and so were some bottles of beer. Fortunately my eye defect was not very serious. Besides, I always carried a spare pair in my car, for emergencies like this. A much more lamentable loss was that of the bottles of beer that were broken.

"I cannot hide the fact, sir," I said disapprovingly, "I am really very embarrassed by what has happened. I came mainly to see my friend and discuss one or two things with him. I think the fight was unnecessary. If the father had died and had been buried, the only thing to do would have been for us to ask him the circumstances under which he had to bury him that way. After all, as you rightly said, Pa Andre, he knows the tradition very well. Dennis is not a man to be..."

"He is mad, docta," Pa Andre shouted threateningly. I noticed right away that the old man was very fiery in temper and uncontrollable in rage.

"I beg you, Pa just listen to the doctor," Manda said, doubly ashamed, I was sure, that she had invited me only to have the people disgrace themselves that way in front of me.

"Bo Dennis, this is a sad moment for anybody to demand an explanation from you. But what really happened?" I asked.

He remained silent. When I insisted, he said:

"When my father died in Ovenga I had only 3,000francs. That was all the money I had. I have no money in the bank. They were asking for 2,000 francs for fiscal stamps for an application to transport a corpse. They said I needed a special coffin of about 50,000francs, and that I needed to hire a lorry to carry it here, about 100,000. How could I bring him here?"

"If you were somebody with a head you should have known that your people are here," Pa Andre cut in again. "Who did you ask and he refused to give money to..."

Dennis rose to my feet and bending towards Pa Andre asked:

“Are you the one saying this now?”

Then he turned to me and explained:

“I came to this same man, who is now claiming that he is my father’s brother, before I went with my father. I told him that my father needed more money for his treatment than I had. He said he did not have even one white franc. Nobody gave me anything. I have been looking after my father alone for the past years that he was sick. Alone. Now that he has died and I cannot bring him here his brothers and sisters, all alive and rich, want now to be angry with me. If my father died here in this house, he would have been buried with the same clothes that they buried him in Ovenga.”

I asked for permission from the people to talk to him alone and we went out and stood under the tree where I had parked my car. There I began:

“Bo Dennis, first, accept my sincere condolence on this death of your father.”

He stared at me. But he said nothing. In any case I did not expect him to say anything. I told him:

“I decided to come down here again because I couldn’t find you the last time I was here. I have no doubt that you got my letter to you. Perhaps, I say perhaps, you were absent because you doubted the honesty of my offer, or because you had forgotten of me so completely that you don’t know who had written. Whatever the case, I am here once more to repeat the offer. I have not come to impose anything on you. After all, you have a right to do whatever you please with your life. My opinion of you is still as high as ever. I know that you were born for better things.

You will learn tomorrow from the Central Co-operatives Agency that you have been laid off your job. And there are as many as one million people looking for jobs in the streets. You already have a family. The only security now is a sound qualification. I am surprised that you should be the only

one who fails to see this. Your wife, uncles and all others welcomes the idea very much. See how they treated you in public, kicking you as though you were an infant. If you had given yourself a good education and gotten a respectable job, people could never have done such a thing to you. Look at your house, with a good education you could put up something more solid and safe. So the solution of all your problems is for you to come to live with us in Menako and follow some study programme that would help you.... I already see you in the university within one year and I already see you driving a car of this nature in a few years. You see what I mean?"

Dennis nodded. It may have sounded in his ears as if it was in a dream that I was talking. What else are friends for, you become the answer to your friend's dreams!

"Do you see any sense in the suggestions?" I asked.

He blew his nose, shook his head sadly, but would not talk. He seemed unable to find something to say possibly because, as I realized, I had said so many things. Some made sense, others didn't.

"Bo Dennis, tell me what you think about it," I insisted.

"Let me know your feelings before we proceed with whatever programme they have in there. If you are not keen on it, what's the point my going in to sit and waste precious time? If it is no, say so. I want to help you. Perhaps you have, but I can never forget how much you contributed to my success in the primary school days. What do you say about it, bo Dennis?"

Again he merely looked more confused. I could not tell the source of the confusion. He stood for a while and then shifted the weight to his left leg, leaned back against the tree and looked round the compound as though seeing it for the first time. Then he closed his eyes, squeezed them tight with his right hand, and held them closed for a very long time.

He then opened them gently, looked across at me and then said:

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know, bo Dennis?” I asked.

“I don’t know whether there are any people living on this earth like me.”

“I still do not understand you Dennis,” I said with obvious impatience. “Well, I am glad I have seen you and that I have been able to talk to you personally about my offer to you,” I told him. “Let’s go back and join the rest of your people. I am really so sorry about the death of your father. Here, take this, bo. Buy some drinks so that the family could use to mourn for him.” I held out a 10,000 francs note which I had drawn out of my wallet. He bit his lower lip and held his head down for a thoughtful minute. He then stretched his hand towards the money and, seeing how much it really was, let his hand drop back.

“There is something going on in your mind, Dennis, other than the fact that you have lost your father,” I pointed out. “Take me into full confidence and let me know what it is. What is it?”

“It still concerns my father’s body,” he said.

“What about it?”

“He has not yet been buried.”

“No?”

“No. Not yet. When I could not get the money to bring him back they said they will keep the body for three days and that it was only after then that they will bury it.”

I shook my head. I was beginning not to understand this my old friend.

“It means it should still be in the mortuary in Ovenga at this moment?” I asked.

“If it true that they keep it for three days, then it is still there.”

I pulled myself back a little and looked at him from a distance with dismay for a whole minute and then asked him:

"Then why the hell did you say he had been buried? See how you were nearly killed!"

"It was my uncle who made me say so. He did not wait for me to talk. He never wants me to talk. He never thinks that I have any reasons for doing anything. Besides, in my heart I knew that I will not go back to Ovenga for the body because there is no money..."

"But your uncle was just saying that they would have given money for you to..."

"He cannot. He was saying so because I said he was buried. He was saying so because he wanted the people to continue to believe that I cannot do anything right."

"O.K., this is what I propose to do now. You give me the details about your late father. Are you sure it is in Ovenga and not Bolabola?"

"No. If it was in Bolabola I would have told you. My father wanted me to take him to Bola but on the way there I changed my mind. I told him that I was anxious to know what was really wrong with him, from the right source. I told him that I had no money any more, and that I was tired too of carrying him from one medicineman to another. So I took him to Ovenga. By that time it was too late."

"O.K., so you think if I rang up Ovenga they might still have it there?"

"Perhaps."

"I will arrange to have the body brought here so that you people could give him a fitting burial. But first, take this one. It will help you."

"Please," he protested, "you give them to buy the drinks. It will be better."

"Well, that's true. But you still keep it for your own use. I will give them something. I will let them know exactly what the situation is, and that by the end of tomorrow, the body of your father will reach Mbongo.

Chapter Seven

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

WHAT COULD I do? Nothing. I took the money which Dr. Max gave me. When I returned to the house Dr. Max told the people what I had told him about my father's corpse. Pa Andre refused to accept this second explanation. He insisted that I had already buried the man.

"But if the body is already buried, what reasons can he have for telling me that it hasn't?" Dr. Max enquired.

"He never has any reason for doing anything, docta. He is like that, always," Pa Andre started again. Dr. Max went on:

"Whatever the case, I shall be passing through Ovenga to enquire about it. If it is still there I shall arrange for it to be sent here immediately. I don't think I shall be able to participate in the funeral but I am going to leave something with my friend's wife so that a coffin could be made for him. I could have done more but I was not quite prepared for this news when I came."

He gave Manda a cheque for 50,000 francs. Pa Andre rose to make a speech to thank him, but he refused.

"Let us only be thankful to God," he said. But Pa Andre still had one important question. He asked:

"Is he going with you, docta?"

"It is up to him to decide. After he shall have buried his father, if he still wishes to come he shall be very welcome."

“You see what we were saying about your friend, docta?” the old fool went on. “You think that anybody who has a head can come and say they have buried his father when they have not?”

“Let’s forget about that now,” Dr. said. “I am sorry that I have come here at this unfortunate moment of my friend’s father’s death. But I am pleased that I have been able to see him after such a very long time and to converse with him. I am very glad too, for having met you all.”

He stopped and asked Manda about the old woman he met the first time he came here. He meant the Big mama who made me so furious.

“She has gone to the village, doctor. She will stay there for a very long time.”

“Did she buy the medicines? She was complaining very bitterly of her health and poverty.”

“Medicines?” Manda shouted. “She bought her beer and drank. That Big mama, she is very interesting.”

Dr. Max looked disappointed but he did not really care about what she did with the money. I was hoping that in his heart he would not be thinking that if he gave us money we would also spend it only on beer. He said:

“Well, when she comes, tell her that I was here again. I hope that by the grace of God, some day, I would be able to find time to stop here again and greet you all.”

Max left Mbong without a single word of promise from me that I would come to live with him. I did not even tell him that I needed some time to think about it. That same evening, after the people had dispersed to their various homes, Manda called me and asked.

“Dennis, don’t you now see that you completely misunderstood your friend? Do you think that a man who is ready to do all this can decide to ridicule you as you were saying, Dennis?”

"I have misunderstood nobody," I told her. "People have completely misunderstood me. And by people here I mean YOU. You have refused to see that I have a right to lead my life the way I want..."

"Then you will continue to lead your life the way you want, Dennis. Nobody can force you."

"You have already forced me," I said. "A meeting has been held in my house to receive a visitor who is coming to see me. And that meeting has been arranged without anybody talking to me about it. Because nobody thinks I have a right to be consulted."

"You were not in, Dennis," she tried to defend herself.

"If I meant anything to you and anybody else, you should have waited for me to come. I don't think Dr. Essemu just decided to come down on his own like that. Something has happened between my family and Dr. Essemu from which I have been excluded. And, whatever you people are thinking about me, let me remind you that I still have a right to decide for myself. You have called the whole tribe together and asked my uncle to slap me before your God. I still have not given your God an answer. And I will not, until you make them all see that they are just killing me."

Manda looked very guilty in her silence. I told her further: "You must agree that you were wrong. Very wrong." And she really saw my point, only that women, being what they are, she would not admit. But she said:

"If you think that I was very wrong, Dennis, then I cannot argue because it is you who are looking at what I have done. If you see that it was not correct for us to receive Dr. Max in your absence, then I agree, and I beg you to forgive me. And I want also to let you know that whatever I have done in this matter which you have found annoying, I have done so because I wanted us to take this chance which God has given us and live better. I don't think that a man who has married a wife and has two children with her can be allowed to lead his life as he alone wants. I have tried to change your mind because I keep thinking of the children. So forgive me."

I did not tell her plainly that I had forgiven her. I wanted to still be the man, but it was obvious from my kindly attitude that I no longer begrudged her. I did not insist that my point of view was right, or even that it was hers which was right. I told her: "I have to think over what Dr. Max has said for a long time."

Dr. Max left Mbongo on Sunday evening. On Tuesday morning the corpse of my father arrived, but the funeral that followed bore nothing of the tradition which Pa Andre had told Dr. Max that his brother deserved. There was no difference between burying him in Mbongo and leaving him in Ovenga to be buried by the government. I was not surprised. Really, it was Pa Andre himself who was responsible for the shameful way in which it was handled. When Manda went to tell him that the corpse had come, he told her:

"I want your husband to learn from this that, I, Andre cannot become a dog for the sake of a bone. Your husband knows that according to the tradition under which we were born, when a man dies, it is his brother who takes the trouble of crying for him and burying him. If your husband had not completely lost his mind in his madness, he should have known that I was to be the one to buy food and wine to cry for his father. Yet, he decided to insult my grey hairs, in public, telling me that my brother was buried when he was not; turning me into a footpath because I showed that I was angry with him. Have we changed places? Is it not the right of a father to beat his son?"

Manda did not answer. He went on:

"Now, my daughter, do you know why he has not come here himself and only sent you?"

"He did not send me, Pa. I came myself."

"He had sent you because he knew that he could look into my face again."

By Wednesday evening the ceremony was over. My father was buried behind the house. But this was only the beginning of my problems with my people. The rumour that I had killed my father (which Pa Andre did everything to propagate) was never to be easily destroyed. People I had never known before jeered at me as I passed in various quarters of the town. This made it hard for me to go out, and in order to find something to do to get some money I needed to walk about and ask if anybody had a job of any kind to be done.

The only solution would have been for me to retreat into the quiet of my home. But home was no home. I could not even sit down and mix paints to paint anything. Could Manda forgive me for letting the opportunity slip by. Besides, she took upon herself to tell the children that I was a mad man, and that if they continued to sit and converse with me I would kill them. Then the small amount of money which Max had left with me was all but exhausted.

The way Manda went about forcing me to go to Menako did not please me at all. But I began to see and also feel that the need for going. Things had changed a lot since the time Max first wrote to me. I began to see clearly that the solution to the misery lay in my leaving Mbongo. And to leave Mbongo for any other place than Menako could solve no problem.

But it was not just the desire to escape the insults of others that made me decide to go; in my mind's eyes I began to see, if only very faintly, the possibility of working hard and passing an exam which would make me rich enough to build a better house and buy clothes for my wife and children, even if I wouldn't be able to buy a car. In short, all that Dr. Max had said began to take shape in my mind as the only thing to do.

On the eleventh day after Dr. Max returned to Menako I went to the hospital and begged for permission to talk to him through the phone. It was just a little after noon, and I knew he would be in his office.

Menako was very far away, and I had often heard people complaining of difficulties of reaching friends in different parts of the country by phone. I had imagined that I would be at the phone for a very long time. But the phone rang only once and I heard a voice from the other end which sounded like Dr. Essemo's. I held the receiver for sometime without knowing what to say.

"Dr. Essemo speaking, please," he said.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Essemo."

"Good afternoon. Who's speaking please?"

"Me, Dr. Essemo, Dennis Nunqam NDENDEMAJEM."

"D-e-n-n-i-sss?" he shouted.

"Yes, Dr. Essemo."

"Bo, Dennis! You are the one calling?"

I agreed.

"That's a surprise I tell you," he said. "Bo, Dennis, how are things with you?"

"Hmm, fine. Things are fine." What else could I say?

After all I was alive, which meant that things were fine.

"Good," he said. "I am so glad to hear from you. Where are you calling from?"

"I am at the hospital here in Mbongo. There is somebody who works here who said he knows you well. A certain Mr. Noah. He said he spoke to you last week about my father's body."

"That's right. That's right. I asked him to inform me as soon as the corpse was delivered. That's good. So how was the funeral?"

"Hmm, it was fine."

"Too bad I could not attend. Bo, Dennis, is there anything I can do for now?"

I cleared my throat twice and then remained silent again.

"Bo Dennis, any problem?" he asked.

I heard him quite alright, and there was a problem. The man who had given me the phone sat just opposite me. He must have heard Max asking the question, although he was

writing. I began to wonder what it would look like if I told Max the problem and he said he would not solve it. I was trembling with the receiver in my hand.

"Yes," I said. "I just telephoned to thank you very much for all that you did for us when you came down."

"Oh! Bo, Dennis, you don't need to bother about that. After all, what are friends for? I only wish I could do more for you. You may not believe, but I really feel your problems deep in my flesh. I am glad the body came and he was given the traditional burial. May he rest in peace. So how is your wife and the children?"

"Hmm, well. They are well."

"I missed seeing the children. Greet them all for me."

This was the point at which I should have said goodbye. I knew Dr. Max was expecting me to say so. I did not say so. He too did not put down the receiver. I was drawing endless circles with my right hand on the table before me. Then I asked myself, if Dr. Max dropped the receiver without my saying anything, how was I going to get another opportunity to talk to him? It was through the phone, after all, I thought. If I said what I wanted to say and he did not want it, he would not beat me. Nobody would know. I had not told anybody. I would even deny that I had ever spoken to him over the phone.

"Hello!" he called again.

I closed my eyes and said:

"Hello."

"Anything else, bo Dennis?"

"Yes. I...I..." The words stuck in my throat.

"I am listening, bo," Dr. Max said. I paused for a very long time. I knew he was still listening. Then I said to him:

"I was also phoning to ask whether it is too late for me to come now to your place as you said." I said very fast, so fast that it was only Max himself who knew what I had said. The man who gave me the phone looked at me,

indicating that he has been following up what I was saying, but had not caught the last thing I said. But the reply made my fears unnecessary.

“My goodness! It isn’t late at all,” Dr. Max said. “Have you decided to come?”

“Yes I have.”

“Then that’s fine. That’s really fine. In fact, I kept hoping you would finally make up your mind to come. So when do you make it?”

“I don’t know. When do you want me to come?”

“I have said any time will be fine. Even if you came today it would be very good still. Are you coming or I will come for you?”

I thought it would be impolite and ungrateful to ask him to come down for me. He saved me:

“I have a project in the South West on the 23rd of June. If you do not mind then we could arrange it in such a way that I would drop by and we leave.”

“Okay. Please, thank you very much.”

“Don’t mention, bo. I only hope something really good can come of the endeavour.”

“I hope so, too.”

“Hello, bo Dennis,” he called again.

“Hello.”

“Please, between us there should be no formality. Call me Max. You don’t need to call my title. Leave that for those who don’t know me as you do. Call me the way I call you. You get what I mean?”

“Hmmm, well, yes. I do.”

Chapter Eight

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

I DID not speak to Manda about my new decision to go to Menako until the day after I had talked to Max. I had not told her before going to phone. What if I had made up my mind when Max no longer wanted me to come. I was still haunted by the odd feeling that I might finally never leave Mbongo. I could not get a certain thought off my mind - that Max might have agreed only to please me, and that sooner or later he would reconsider how I, Dennis, had made him waste two long journeys to Mbongo and spent so much money, and withdraw the offer. I could immediately see before my mind's eye the exact wording of a letter which I was certain Max would be sending to me soon:

Dear Dennis;

I am sorry that after having raised your hopes to such an extent I have now decided to cancel the promise of having you come to live with us. I have talked things over with my wife and we think it is not in the best interest of this noble family and of my rank as the Director of the University Teaching Hospital that I should welcome you here after you had made me waste that trip of April 25th, broken my very expensive spectacles, torn my shirt in your useless fight, and categorically refused to say a word even after I promised to carry your father's corpse across the whole country for you...

That same evening, in spite of my fears I decided to let Manda know my mind.

“I asked you to give me some time about going to Menako, Manda.”

She answered without looking at me:

“I don’t have anything in the matter,” she said. “Who am I to be giving you time? If you want to think about it for ten years, that is your trouble. If you want us to rot here, let us rot. A man uses his own money to come and ask you to go to his house, you lock your door and run away; a man brings your father’s corpse to you, buries him with his own money, and you cannot even say thank you. You cannot even make him feel that you are glad about what he has done...”

I cut a long story short by telling her the truth at once:

“I have already told him,” I said. “I phoned him yesterday to talk to him about it.”

“And what did he say, Dennis?” Her face brightened up.

“He agreed. He said I should come.”

She was sitting by the fireside with her back towards me carrying our younger son in her arms. He was sleeping and she was cracking egusi for soup the following day. She had been paying very little attention to what I was saying. In fact, since my refusal to welcome Max, nothing that I said or did interested her any more.

When I talked about my having phoned to Dr Max she turned with a start and asked me what he had said. She was positive it was her imagination that was deceiving her. I repeated my words in a manner which definitely indicated to her that I was deadly serious. She rose suddenly and, dragging the child into the bed, ran back and, falling on me, hugged me round and round where I was sitting. Then she pulled a stool and sat facing me.

“So, when are you going, Dennis?”

I told her about the arrangement Max had made, and while she was still shaking with excitement I asked:

“If I go, Manda, what will happen to you people? How are you going to get food and other things?”

She looked at me as if I had slighted her.

“Dennis,” she cried, “you don’t know how much strength this news has given me now that I am sitting in front of you. We cannot die because you are not here. I will work on that our farm. I will plant cassava and make garri. You know how it gives money now? I will plant vegetables too. I will do everything. Go, Dennis, go. If it is because of us that you are fearing, just go and you will be glad to hear that we are very well. All these years we did not die, is it now that we are going to die?”

But I warned her:

“Manda, now that I have agreed to go, I want it to remain a secret. Mention it to nobody...”

“Even to Pa Andre?”

“NOBODY, Manda, NOBODY.”

“But if they do not know how are they going to stop insulting you? How are they...”

“They insult me because you insult me, and because they see me. The moment I am no longer here, they will stop. I have not decided to go because I fear anybody, or because I don’t want anybody to say anything to me. If I go, you should know it is because I think I will gain from going there. I hope”

She did not like the doubt in the way I was saying it. She asked:

“But Dennis, why do you keep saying IF all the time? You think that...”

“You never can tell. Anything can happen at any time to anybody,” I said.

She saw it differently.

“No, Dennis,” she said. “Nothing will happen to you, Nothing will happen to Dr. Essemo. You will go there.”

Ten days after I phoned to Max a letter came to me from Menako. Before I opened the letter I told Manda that I had dreams for the past couple of days in which Max cancelled

the invitation, and I was sure those dreams had come true. But Manda seemed to have such faith in Max that she began laughing at me before I nervously tore it open.

She was right. The letter came from Max quite all right. He had only written to reassure me that he would be coming on the morning of the appointed day, June 23rd 1970.

At 9 o'clock that morning Max arrived. After I received the last letter I had bought myself a large plastic handbag which could carry all my clothes, from the left-over of the money given for my father's funeral. That morning too, soon after Max's arrival, I was surprised to see that except for Pa Andre, every other member of the family had gathered to send me off. I called Manda to our room and there I asked her why she broke her word:

"I told nobody, Dennis," she tried to argue.

"They just came..."

Then she decided to be frank.

"You said I should not tell anybody, Dennis. But I was too glad to keep quiet. I told only two people. I don't know how they are all here now. Dennis, you know that after you have passed your exams and returned back here, you will be helping the whole family. So I want them to know so that they will all bless you and pray to God that everything should go fine. That's why I told them."

I said nothing more on the issue, but I made no promise to anybody. And when the old woman, our neighbour said:

"My son, do not come out of that river without a tadpole in your mouth," I did not answer.

About thirty minutes after Max arrived I invited him for a *tête-à-tête* in the room. It was mainly to tell him my financial problems, the problems I knew my family would face in my absence. I told him how much I used to earn and how much I used to spend on food and other things.

Instead of complaining and blaming me as I feared he would, Max only apologized to me. He said:

"It's my error, bo Dennis, I had long considered that but forgot to discuss it with you. I had decided that we would be sending her about 20,000 francs every month. Don't you think that will be O.K.?"

"It will be too much," I said. "I earned 20,000 francs, but we spent only about 3,000 francs on food. Send 5,000 francs."

"How about clothes? They need to buy them from time to time."

"No, they have clothes that will last them until I come back," I tried in vain to persuade him. "How long will I be with you?"

"If you finish your exams even next month you can come back. Whenever you finish you return. Are you ready for it?"

I only shook my head. How could I commit myself?

"Well, I am," I said. "I will try."

Max then called for Manda and asked to see the children.

"They are far, doctor."

"I will wait for them."

Manda immediately went round calling and cursing until she found them and dragged them to him.

"This is Dieudonne, doctor," she introduced the first.

"He is six and half years old, doctor. This is Felix. He is three and half years of age."

The boys had gone down the stream behind the house looking for crabs. They were both naked when Manda found them, but only Dieudonne obeyed her orders to dress up. He came wearing an oversized pair of shorts wound into knots and folded round the waist to keep it in place. Both of them were muddy.

I was looking at Max as they were coming, and I could see that he really took pity on them. Even me, myself, I knew that they did not look healthy. Left to me we would have even gone away without his seeing them because I

was ashamed to show him my children. I am sure Manda was also thinking the same way, otherwise she would have remembered to tell them to stay in the house.

"How are you, small Dennis?" Max greeted Dieudonne who had been standing about a metre away from him, biting his finger-nails. When he heard the greeting he withdrew his hand from his mouth and said:

"Give me money."

I turned my face and looked into the bush. That was why I was afraid to bring them here. Max did not seem to mind like us. He instead smiled, and drawing out his wallet took out a 5,000 francs note which he gave him saying:

"This is for you and Felix, O.K.? Give mummy to buy something for you."

As soon as the money touched the boy's palm he fled, pursued by Felix, without a single word of thanks. I stood petrified. It was as though it was I who had subconsciously begged for the money, and had gone away without thanking him. But I remembered that I too had just asked for money. I was also hoping that Max was not thinking that it was Manda who had asked the children to beg for money. It was she who ran after them and dragged them back to come and say 'thank you' to Max.

"You should not have followed them that way, Madam," Max said.

"Why not, doctor? That is not small money. They don't even know how much it is. And see how he just took it and ran as if it was his money that he gave you to hold..."

"Children all over the world are the same. Don't blame them."

Dr. Essemu's comments brought some relief into my heart and Manda's too. I told her about the plans Max had for them in my absence. She ran and, kneeling at Max's feet, began to thank him. Max held her hand and asked her to stand up.

"I have done nothing that you should thank me for, madam. The really important aspect of the whole exercise is the success of your husband. Tell him to study hard because with his success there will be many more rewards."

"He has already told me that he is ready to learn very hard, doctor. Not so, Dennis?" She turned to me.

"I will do it," I said.

As I was trying to put my bag outside Dr. Essemo said:

"Your name, is it a Christian name or what? It sounds like Spanish. There is Amanda, in Spanish, or something of the sort."

"Doctor, you too can ask terrible things. My name is actually Magdalene. That was the name they gave. But when I went to school my father called in Manda. Even in my baptism card it is Manda. I also began calling myself Manda."

Max found it very funny. Manda too laughed.

The bag I was to take on the journey was not too big for one person to carry, but everybody present tried to hold a piece of it when it was time for it to be put into the trunk of the car. They would not allow Max to carry it alone as he wanted to, because he had done so much already. They wanted to show him that if they had their way, they would willingly help him too.

We left at about eleven o'clock. I had told myself repeatedly that I would not think of Mbongo any more until I had finished my studies and passed my exams. I had resolved to pass my exams and really make Max happy for ever bringing up the idea. But that morning I discovered that Mbongo had become part of me. Driving out of there was like pulling a fish out of water. The sight of the giant mahoganies and irokos, of bamaboo huts, of skeletal dogs and sickly looking children; the stench of uncovered latrine, of pigs, dead and alive, the endless croaking of frogs under the stones that supported my crumbling house. All these

had become the very arteries through which my lifeblood flowed. The more I heard those sounds, smelt those smells, and saw those sights, the more secure I seemed to feel among my never –ending worries.

But now, I found myself shut up in the heavenly comfort and freshness of Max's car. The only smell was that of Air Fresheners, where the only sounds I heard were those of Beethoven and Handel. To speak the truth, every inch away seemed to give me the feeling of a sharp knife cutting into and severing the umbilical cord of my very existence. My very great resolve suddenly became coloured with feelings of regret for leaving the place. My appreciation for the deep concern my wife had shown in making me see the necessity for going, began to dissolve into doubts which gradually turned into hate.

Can anybody believed that? I began to curse her in the same way that I cursed my uncle and everyone else whose attitude towards me had compelled me to want to leave the place. I began, in my mind, to curse the fate that had finally made my going inevitable. The intention and determination to go and study and make my life better began to slip from my mind and I began to look on Max as though he had actually compelled me to abandon where I truly and naturally belonged.

When, as we drove away, I waved out of the window, I was not waving to Manda and the relatives, as Max did. I was waving to the sights and smells of Mbongo jungle: the dogs, the stench, the broken houses, the gutters reeking with excrement and the trees through whose dark canopies the rays of the sun never shone.

At Bokam, about 200 kilometres away we made our first major stop. Here Max refuelled the car and also picked up one of his workers who was making his research on Smallpox and River Blindness in that region. So far very little conversation had passed between us. After that initial shock of leaving my much-loved jungle, a few things crossed my

mind, and I dared to voice them to Max. One of them was why a man in Max's position should not travel by air, or ask a driver to help him. He explained:

"The airports are so far away from the various stations I visit that it will only waste my time. The only solution should be for the government to place a helicopter at my disposal so that I go where I want when I want. But the government does not have that much money to buy them for every single doctor on field trips. Originally I used to travel with my drivers but I found they were too nervous. If you told a man that he was driving too fast he began to crawl; if you said he was too slow he wanted to put wings on the car. I had an accident on every single trip. But since taking over the wheel myself I haven't had any."

After that I did not seem to be interested in anything more. Max raised a question about local politics.

"Who is the parliamentarian for Mbongo?"

"I didn't know."

"He is not doing his job at all. He should do something about the road there."

I did not answer. He turned to sports:

"Are the First Division football matches as serious down here as they are up in the North West?"

I said I didn't know. As a matter of fact, I didn't know most of those things in which he took an interest. Max assumed that I must be thinking of my wife and children whom I had just left behind.

After Bokam the conversation was mainly between Max and his worker until we arrived Fousap where the man left us. It was about 200 kilometres from Mbongo and 400 kilometres from Menako. The vegetation was much thinner; there were tall trees quite all right, but these seemed to grow only along the river valleys. The rest of it was just plain Sahel.

"I think we shall have lunch here and some rest too," Max said. "I am beginning to feel really tired. You should be tired too, I guess, Dennis."

“Hmm, well, a bit,” I admitted. For some reason, I was afraid, and even ashamed, to admit that I was indeed hungry. We drove through the commercial centre of the town and then took a route which led almost back towards the way we had come by, until we came to LE PEUPLE, a hotel.

“I always have my meals and rest here each time I travel this way,” Max said

“I see,” I replied.

“It’s a very quiet place, one of the three first-class hotels in this place.”

“I see,” I replied.

We parked the car and climbed the steps to the restaurant at the back of the second floor. There we took our seats. I felt most apprehensive. There was something in the splendour of the hotel that made me nervous and I found myself saluting nearly everybody sitting around us. I had not had anything to eat since morning, yet I felt an almost irrepressible urge to tell Max that I was not hungry. But I could not protest. I lacked the courage to do so.

Max ordered a whole chicken for himself and then a plate of rice, salad and some potato chips.

“What would you like, Dennis?” he asked me.

“Anything,” I said.

“Like what? There is just everything here.”

He gave me the menu. The items were not indicated by names I was familiar with. I could not say I didn’t recognize the names. I stared at it for so long that Max decided to choose for me.

He asked the waiter to bring us two plates of everything he had ordered for himself. In the meantime he went to the bar and asked for two bottles of BECKS BEER to be sent over to our table.

“I won’t drink any beer,” I said, when the drinks were brought. “I don’t want to drink anything.”

“Nothing at all? You should try at least a coke. Bring him a Big Coke,” he told the waiter.

"No, a small one," I said reluctantly. When the food came Max ate with very great relish, but I merely tasted a bit of each item and then sat up, looking outside at the interminable stretches of shrubs and grassland which lay on both sides of the town. When he had finished eating and the table cleared, Max said:

"Now, bo Dennis, I would like us to talk things over a bit more seriously. You know that since you decided to come with me on this experiment we have not really sat down to discuss anything about the kind of studies you would like to pursue. I did not think it terrible urgent because I knew that whatever you choose to study I should be able to find somebody, some authority to help you succeed in it. But I think I ought in a very general way to know your inclinations, your goal.... What do you want to study? By which I mean, what would you like to become in future?"

I licked my lips and remained silent. I expected that the very first thing of Max to ask me would be about how I had lived for the past fifteen years during which we had been separated. Was that an error Max made, I wondered. Max could certainly not be making a mistake. If he did not ask me about my past, it might be because he did not want to go into unnecessary details. Perhaps Max knew that a creature of my type could not have any past on which the future, a good future, could be built. Of course, I concluded, Max would be perfectly right to ignore my past in that respect. After all, what past did I really have? It was all emptiness, deceit, self-deceit and imprisonment.

"Do you understand my point, bo Dennis?" he asked.

"I do, I do," I admitted. But I told him I could not choose. "I don't know what to choose. You know best what the best profession is. You know best what a man like me can do to be something in this world."

Max paused for a few seconds. I am sure he took his mind back to our primary school days; the only knowledge of me which I thought he still retained was certainly of

those days. Those days when I was a most hard-working boy who always came first in class and who was never beaten by a problem. He must still have been believing very strongly that, given the opportunity that was now available to me, there was nothing I couldn't do if I meant to. And the reason I thought so was because of the next thing that he told me:

"In that case," he began, "I should say medicine. It is the worthiest profession. It is the career of careers. It is the career of respect, success, money, in fact, of anything. I am talking from my own personal experience."

I nodded without opening my mouth. After a few seconds I enquired rather feebly whether there was nothing else that could give respect. Max twisted his mouth contemptuously and, shaking his head several times, said:

"Nnnnaahh! There could be a million other ways of gaining respect, no doubt. But I cannot think of any that offers everything in the same proportion as medicine. What were you thinking of?"

I had thought of saying Art, but I quickly recalled that the whole world had already convinced me that it was an act of insanity to want to be an artist. If I were mistaken, and if art was in fact among the professions, Max would have mentioned it. I told him softly:

"Nothing, I was only asking."

"It is medicine. And I say so for several reasons. First, my father wanted me to be a doctor and I have seen nothing to regret about in it. I became a doctor with tears. But it was just because I had always been a weaker student than people like you. In fact, in Europe, I had to put in twice and even three times as much time as most of my comrades. Otherwise I should have become a GOAT again, after you made me into a SHEEP..."

He saw that the expression on my face had changed from calm attention to a mixture of surprise and sadness.

“Yes, you must believe me, Dennis,” he said, “when I say this. After some years in the secondary school I discovered that I was not really dull but lazy, and that although my memory was not as retentive as yours, if I learned hard I could achieve anything. Now I think no more of those tears, only of the rewards. I tell you, they are enviable. I say this not to boast but to inspire you... I call the District Officer by his name, I talk to the Governor whenever I want. No formality. I call company Commanders by name, and I control the University Teaching Hospital with a staff of over twenty professors, and every year we turn out doctors. We decide those who are to be doctors. We decide the fate of the nation. Even if a man can operate on a fly, if I say no, that man will not be given the certificate to practise, he is finished. What else is the definition of power and respect?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Look at the financial part of it. My official monthly salary is 450,000 francs. That is much money, by any standards. I am a company doctor for Elders and Fyfes and Cadbury and Frye. From these two companies I make over 400,000 francs every month. Sometimes for months I don’t even look at my bank account for what flows in from the University. So you see that medicine will be very hard to beat.”

“True, bo Max.” What else could I say?

“I am sure that with your four years experience in the commercial college...”

“Two years, bo Max. I did not go to the end. After the second year my father could not pay the fees again. So I left.”

“Well, that does not make much difference at all. With that foundation you can always manage to scrape a pass in at least two subjects in the London General Certificate of Education, to qualify you to enter for the Medical School

entrance examinations. The entry requirements are: at least two subjects at the G.C.E. Advanced Level, one of which must be Physics, Maths, Biology or Chemistry. But we can always waive the requirements or readjust them in certain cases - like this. You also require English and five subjects at the O. Level. So if you are keen on it, there is just no earthly reason why you will not be able to enter the Medical School. If you can't pass the A Levels, or, say you find them troublesome, we will make sure that you concentrate only on the O Levels. If you have any of the O Levels, especially Biology or Chemistry, we shall create a condition for admitting you.

"Once admitted into the school you could be sure that passing will be no problem because everything will be in our hands. So the programme in short, is this: you will begin with the 'O' Levels, and you will try some in January, just to see at what pace we are going to move. I know that the time is short, but you will have all the technical assistance that any single candidate has ever had. I have always known you to be very intelligent Your business will be only to read, eat and sleep. What should stop us then from succeeding? Eh, bo Dennis?"

"Well, nothing," I said, because I knew that was what he expected to hear.

Chapter Nine

*

Dennis Nunquam Ndendemajem

WE ARRIVED in Menako at 8 o'clock in the evening. But we did not go straight to the Government Residential Area or GRA as Max called it simply. That was where he lived. Max drove first to his office where he deposited some files.

It was already very dark, but even in the darkness I was able to see what the town looked like. It was vastly different not only from Mbongo which I now even felt ashamed to think of but also from all other towns which we had passed on the way. The very first thing I noticed about the town was the general absence of a natural vegetation. In Fousap the vegetation was thin, but occasionally we saw clumps of trees, virgin forests and the like. As we drove past all I could see were tall buildings, and all I could hear outside the music in the car were the noises from machines or the engines of passing motor cars.

"There are really no trees in this place," I said almost to myself.

"We have left the bush into the city," Max told me. "Whatever tree you find here is planted. Nothing wild. Menako tames nature."

I remained silent. Did the answer mean that I was from the bush and had been brought there to be tamed? Who knows? Did I really need any taming? I was not sure. The streets were very wide, very well tarred and there were no

signs of stray animals anywhere. The houses on either side of the streets seemed to have been very carefully constructed in straight lines. I could see refuse drums at almost regular intervals along the road. Towards the G.R.A. artfully trimmed hedges of some unknown species of flowers lined both sides.

"I live here," Max said, after we had driven for about thirty minutes from town. We drove up to the gate of one of the most conspicuous buildings. There was a board by the entrance. It read:

HOUSE N° 777

DR. MAXIMILLIAN E. ALEKWIEUNCHAA

The gate was shut. Max said it was usually shut when he was out of town on a long journey. He horned twice and waited. Presently, a night-watchman ran up from somewhere under the building and pulled the gate open, saying defensively:

"Welcam docta. I nobi sabi say na you, locta. I tink say na moto wey idi pass for rote."

"That's O.K, Jerimiah. No palaver. How are you?" Max spoke through his open window.

"Vely well, locta. We tang Got."

I was not myself as we drove through the iron gate. The passage seemed to immediately strike a certain chord of sorrow and fear in my heart that was to continue to vibrate for the rest of my life in Menako. The sight of Fousap that afternoon and that of Menako so far did not bother me. Rather, the places reminded me of Ovenga and of Heathrow Airport and of the nightmare experiences I had undergone there.

But of all that I had seen, the gate into Max's house made me most uncomfortable. I passed through it with the same shudder that I had passed through the gate of Komen-dor prison after my repatriation from London. I managed to fight the thought out of my mind for a second when Max asked me to climb down and wait for him while he went to park the car in an archway beneath the building.

It was a two-storey building and I stood looking tongue-tied at the massive structure whose value I could not guess, but was sure it was not less than 100 million francs. From the ground to the roof, as far as I could see in the bright light that shone from every side, the walls were very carefully plastered with multicoloured one-centimetre square marble tiles. I could see a balcony on the second floor which I was sure ran right round that upper floor, only broken at the staircase from below.

"How about my bag?" Max was coming without it.

"It will be brought. Let's go up."

I turned round to follow him but halted and looked across the compound.

"Do you own this house, bo Max?" I was forced to ask.

"It is a Government house," he said. "The Government built it for senior civil servants, but if I wanted to build even two like this for myself I would have done so ere long. I pay nothing here as rent. You see what I was telling you about medicine?"

I nodded in silence.

"Let's go up, bo."

I followed with mute trembling steps as we mounted the winding staircase bound on either side by elaborately decorated balustrades of something I was sure must be silver. Before we reached the main door upstairs two little girls were already chanting:

"Daaadi, daadi, daaadi."

And as soon as we got there the smaller of the two sprang on to him. Max caught her as though he had been expecting her to jump and lifted her into the air and caught her again. He did it twice and then took the bigger girl and threw her up in like manner. Then as he put her down he said:

"Meet my friend here, uncle Dennis. Say hello to uncle."

Uncle? I thought Max had misinformed the children about me. I was not even from the same tribe with them. Why tell

lies? The children would think I was very irresponsible if I was really their uncle and had never visited them before. The two girls walked up to me while Max introduced them:

"They are my two daughters, bo. Vivian and Belinda."

Belinda greeted first:

"How are you, uncle Bo Dennis?"

"O.K. I am not bo Dennis. I am Dennis."

"But my daddy called you bo."

"Yes."

"Then why do you say...?"

"Bo is just another word for *friend*."

"I see," she said.

Look at how people bring up children, I said to myself. If they were my children they will be begging for money and stealing meat from pots of soup! I looked at the little girl questioning me and then asked her:

"How are you too?"

As I spoke I looked at Max. I was not very sure that I was doing the right thing yet. He was not even looking my way. Vivian greeted in her turn. By this time we were already entering the house, the two girls clinging on either side of me as though they had known me for life.

We were just stepping into the parlour when a broad-hipped woman emerged from a room to the left. I imagined at once that she must be the lady of the house. She was just as tall or even slightly taller than Max and had been plaiting her hair which hung in curled locks over her broad shoulders. Everything about her seemed to be large: a face once black, but now painted to look like a pink mask against the general darkness of her body, rose squarely from her long neck and disappeared into the tangles of hair, a broad forehead and an equally broad and almost bulbous nose that rose like a cliff over a wide mouth and thick lips.

She was wearing a light blue blouse which was held in place by two tiny strings that were buried in the flesh on either shoulder, exposing tufts of dark hair which seemed

to sprout from under her armpits when she raised her arm. The front of the blouse was cut so low that it seemed to deliberately expose the entire upper half of her breasts that hung like water-melons.

"Meet Gertrude, my wife, Dennis," Max gestured towards the lady, and then he said to her: "Gertrude, this id Dennis, the gentleman I have been talking of."

"Good evening, madam," I greeted.

"Thank you, welcome."

We shook hands.

"Come in please. Sit down," she said as she sank into one of the sofas that backed the door. I looked at the soft, green, thick rug for one second and passed behind the armchairs she had shown me and went to the dining table at the corner. There I pulled one of the chairs and sat, my eyes moving in shocked admiration and sustained bewilderment from one object to the other.

Gertrude stared at me for a whole minutes. Then she rose and said:

"Mr. Dennis would you like something to cool down?"

I licked my lips, looked first at the roof and then at the floor, but said nothing. There was something in her very presence that made me extremely nervous. I nursed secret fear that Max may have mentioned to her those dirty games we used to play. Some wives could hate a man for life for having played such games with her husband.

"We have Brandy, Whisky, Gin, Campari, Schnapps, Gold Harp and Special. We have some sweet drinks too."

I scratched my head, looked at her. I did not want to make anybody think that I was a drunkard. I said very politely:

"I will take only water, madam."

Gertrude giggled slightly and called aloud:

"Who is there to give Mr. Dennis water to drink?" The next minute the steward came in from the kitchen with a bottle of ice cold water and a glass which he placed in front

of me and was just about to begin pouring the water into the glass when Max came out of the room into the parlour.

“What you give a man who has just made such a very tiring journey is a bottle of something, not water,” he said to the servant.

“But that is what the man wants,” Gertrude said, looking not at Max who had spoken but at me. She looked first at my hair, the jumpa I wore over a greyish long sleeved shirt betraying some evidence of mending at the exposed shoulder. She looked at my baggy trousers and at my brown canvas shoes, then she smiled to herself and rose and went into the room. I was sure of what she went to ask Max. She must have gone to ask him whether it was a villager like myself that he had been making so much noise about. Yes, I was sure of that.

I did not drink the water I asked for. I think I forgot that I had asked for it and that it had been brought and put before me. The luxury of the home captured all my attention. Eight armchairs made from a substance I could not guess for each was delicately and sumptuously lined with some dark brown wool or fur. An array of musical instruments! There was a radiogram just at the entrance into Max’s room, from which some unearthly music seemed to issue, heard as if not heard at all. A large Phillips radio stood on the central table and a very complex Grundig radio-tape-recorder stood near the dining table. Two enormous speakers were stationed, one of the left and the other on the right wall as you entered the parlour. They were both connected to the Grundig.

A number of coloured photographs of the Essemos lined the walls on every side - Max, perhaps in Europe, lecturing to several whitest and pointing to a skeleton on the blackboard; Max in his full academic robes; Max alone with his two children, Max alone with his wife, and his wife alone with the children.

Belinda was leaning on the dining table, looking at me while Vivian sat quietly at my feet. But it was she herself who came and sat there, I was not the one who carried her and put there. Belinda followed my eyes round the house until I lifted them off the walls. She crawled along the edge of the table and came to me.

“Are you coming to live with us?”

“Yes,” I smiled drily.

“For how long?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is your home?”

“In Mbongo.”

“Is that where you were born?”

“No. I was born in Bonalikondo. Do you know where that is?”

“No. Where is it?”

“In the Southwestern Province. Near the coast.”

“Is that where your father lives?”

“My father has died.”

“Died? Too bad. What of your mother?”

“She too has died. Long ago.”

“My father and my mother are not dead.”

“I know.”

“Are you married?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Where is your wife? In Mbongo?”

From the lowered position of my head I saw a pack of cards under the table in the centre of the sitting space. The words on each were carefully carved in very bold lettering. They were lying in a disorderly manner with the topmost one facing a different direction. Out of curiosity, and in order to draw the naughty little girl’s attention away from me I tried to read the upper card from an upside down position. It read:

ASK, AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN TO YOU:

SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND:

KNOCK AND IT SHALL BE OPENED UNTO YOU:

"Who has those papers under there?" I asked her.

"They are mine. They give us in Sunday School."

"Can I look at some of them?"

"Sure," she said and went and brought the whole lot. She did not give them to me. She held out each card and I read. When she came to the fourth card, I stared at it for a whole minute without opening my mouth. It read:

GIVE NOT THAT WHICH IS HOLY UNTO THE DOGS,

NEITHER CAST YE YOUR PEARLS BEFORE SWINE,

LEST THEY TRAMPLE THEM UNDER THEIR FEET,

AND TURN AGAIN AND REND YOU.

"You cannot read this?" she asked with a feeling of achievement

"I cannot."

The little girl ran into the room with the piece of paper and said to her mother:

"Mummy, uncle Dennis cannot read this card."

I didn't quite hear what the mother said, but the girl came back running and with great excitement, said:

"Mummy says you must try and read it. Read it."

I smacked my lips and turned away from her.

"Listen to me read it," she went on and read it to my now unwilling ears.

When she took up another card I told her to go and return them, that I did not want to read anything. I was sure that it was no coincidence that she had picked up that particular card and asked me to read. Somebody, probably her mother had encouraged her to put it among her other cards and use it to warn me about my position in that house. Otherwise, how could Gertrude have insisted so strongly that her daughter should force me to read that particular card? Surely, in their view, I was a dog, a swine.

Returning from keeping away the cards, Belinda continued exactly where she had left off:

“You said your wife is where, uncle Dennis?”

“In Mbongo,” I snapped. There seemed to be no means of getting rid of the nuisance

“Have you any children?”

“Yes. I have two boys.”

“Are they very big boys?”

“One is like you. He is seven years old.”

“He must be bigger than me. I am only five”.

I looked at her again. I could not believe.

“How old is your second son?”

“Four.”

“Where are they? Are they going to come here?”

I decided to change the subject:

“In what class are you in school?”

“Class Two.”

“You must be very intelligent.”

“Yes, I know that,” she said with careless arrogance.

“Mummy and Daddy teach us in the evenings. In what class is your son?”

Once again I tried to change the topic:

“It is so hot in this place. Do you have rains here?”

“Yes, a lot of rain. You say you will be here for a very long time?”

“Yes.”

“Where will your children be?”

“Then will be with their mother.”

“That is very bad. Daddy cannot leave us and go for a long time. You must be with your children and tell them stories and buy them candies. What will you be doing here?”

I turned to the little girl on the floor. Perhaps I could handle that one, I thought.

“What are you doing down there?”

“Her name is Vivian,” Belinda said.

"Yes, I was told."

"Then why did you not say: 'Vivian what are you doing?'"

"I forgot..."

"Next time don't forget. That is what mummy says to us."

"Does mummy not forget too?"

"I don't know, but she says good children do not forget. She says only dull children forget."

I ignored her and asked little Vivian:

"I asked you what you are doing there?"

At this juncture Max came out of the room again and told the steward:

"Bring us a pair of slippers from over there."

He had already changed into a glittering dressing gown and was holding my bag which had been brought into his room. When the boy brought the slippers Max asked me to come with him into a room at the opposite end of the parlour.

"You will be staying here, bo Dennis," Max said, placing the bag on a reading table by a wide open window.

"Hmm." I felt the urge to protest against such honourable treatment. I did not think I deserved it at all because I had disappointed every hope. Yes, and my friend's offer to do all that for me was proof positive of that fact. I shook my head, sat down on a chair near my bag and said softly:

"Bo, thank you."

"I am going to have a rub-down. See you then."

I followed him to the door, peeped into the parlour and then looking about me apprehensively asked:

"Bo, Max, did your wife know that I was coming?"

"Sure."

"Did you discuss me with her?" I asked after some hesitation.

"Of course we did. Why do you ask that?"

The answer on my lips was:

"I mean because from the way she looked at me the very minute she saw me, it made me feel that she will not like to have me live in this house. I don't think I am the kind of

person she expected to see in this house.” I feared that if Max asked me to explain why I thought so I would not be able to do so. I did not imagine that anybody else had seen something amiss in her looks. Gertrude had welcomed me most cordially and most respectfully, in everybody’s eyes. She had offered me a seat and asked me what I would like to drink before going away.

I had seen things differently. I had discerned in that split second of introduction a certain stiff self-assertiveness about her which I thought immediately meant:

“I am the owner of this house and not Max. I am the only one who has the right to sanction a visit. We have too many mouths to feed already. And if anybody is to enter this house he must be rich, well-dressed and cultured.” I thought her snobbish. When Max had introduced me to her she had not just shaken hands, shown me where to sit and then asked me what I would drink. She had looked into my face when she had asked me to sit down. It had been a quick glance, ostensibly very innocent, especially as it was supported with a smile on her lips. But it had hit me like a wounding arrow through the heart; she seemed to be daring me to stain the cleanliness of the house.

And then those searching questions from the little girl! The card which called me a dog, a swine! Who else could have asked the girl to come and shame me to that extent if it wasn’t Gertrude?

“I was just asking, bo Max,” I said simply. There was no means by which I could explain myself. I continued to fear that Max had told more about me than she would have liked to know. Max himself seemed to confirm these fears.

“She knows all about you, so no fears. Feel secure here. And always remember that I brought you here, by which I mean that you should not let anything coming from anybody else offend you if it was not that person who brought you here. I will be coming to see you later.

“Bo, Max,” I called and then said “let me know what is happening. You talk as if there is something wrong between you and your wife because of me...”

“Nothing of the sort. We are all human, that’s why I say so.”

You set out to do something, something else steps in between, and you cannot do what you originally wanted to do. You only think of the thing you were not supposed to be thinking. But why should I be saying all this? Because from that very first night it looked like it was Gertrude’s conduct which I had come to study and not my books. A terrible thing to do! Yet I could not get the thought of her off my mind. When I thought of the very annoying questions which a small Gertrude like that had asked me, I lived in permanent terror of the kind of questions her mother herself would ask me. I decided I must keep my distance so as not to give her the opportunity to ask me anything.

I was certain that Max and Gertrude had not sufficiently agreed on having me come to live there. I could guess that from time to time she would try to make life difficult for me, and that when this occurred Max expected me, in fact, encouraged me to defy her because she did not bring me there. Was I being brought to test Max’s authority in the house? If I took offense at anything that she did or said to me and complained to her husband, would that not only further strain my relationship with his wife? Had I come to split homes? Certainly not. What had I even come to do there? To learn?

Even their little ignorant daughter, Belinda, knew that it was stupid for me to abandon my children and come to live indefinitely off the crumbs from the table of my own classmate, somebody I once taught, somebody who could never have known how to write his name! The little girl was right. I should have been living in Mbongo, telling stories to my sons.

What stories? Had I ever told them stories? Look at Dieudonne, seven years old but still in class one, unable to write a single letter of the alphabet, unable to write a single Arabic figure. Look at the hundreds of things that little girl could say to me. But how could Dieudonne have known? He must be taught.

“My mummy and my daddy teach us at home...”

I had my own pair of slippers in my bag. Perhaps Max did not know that I did. Perhaps Max did not think that I was rich enough to buy that. Perhaps Max did not know that I was not so stupid as to forget it on such an important trip. Perhaps Max knew that I had slippers quite all right, but that they were too contaminated with the slime of Mbongo to have a place in his house. Well, Max would not be wrong to imagine anything about me because I, Dennis, was utterly worthless.

I shut the door, sat down and lifted the pair of slippers to my nose. I was not exactly sure of the difference between their smell and that of my own in the bag, but I was inclined to believe that the ones Max had given me had a more superior and healthier smell.

I would never ever open the bag, I resolved. “There is nothing in it that deserves a place in this house. What I have on is my best. And it is degrading enough. I will not give anybody the opportunity to think worse of me by looking worse.

I went to bathe in the bathroom which belonged to the room I occupied. Gertrude had washed and hung some five white ladies’ pants on the line inside. I went closer, took one in my hands and examined it very carefully. Then I took off my own blue polo pants and scrutinized it childishly, taking particular notice of the black margin of dirt staining the seat. I held one of the white ones to my nose and drew in my breath, kept it back and then smelt my own pants. The odour from mine was so repulsive that I seized the

white pants I had just replaced and holding it against my nose began to breathe in and out as if it had a magical power to restore some damages my own pants had done to my lungs.

Max, I thought, was certainly right to be so suspicious of my belongings as to want me to avoid using them. Could I wash my own pants? I could, but I could never wash them white as they wanted me to learn in leaving the five white ones there. Even if I washed them, where was I going to dry them? Gertrude was sure to come round for inspection. She would see the nasty thing and laugh at me. She would curse me and tell Max to send me away for coming to poison her house with dirt.

Chapter Ten

*

Dennis Nunquam Ndendemajem

THE FOLLOWING morning, as I can say, after breakfast Max disregarded the warning on his daughter's Sunday School card and *cast his pearls before swine!* He summoned all his servants and, calling for me, addressed them:

"I am pleased to introduce to you this gentleman, Mr. Dennis Nunquam Ndendemajem. He is my best friend from youth and he has come to stay here with me. He is not working, but for the weeks, months or even years that he will be in this house you will give him the same measure of respect that you give me as your master. You will wash and iron his clothes as soon as you discover that it is necessary. You will polish his shoes and run any errands for him.

"Then you drivers, he will have the same control over you and the service cars as myself. You will take him to school and back, at his own pace. You will take him to films or football matches or wherever he may choose to go, without consulting me. I will not repeat this. And let me make it abundantly clear that if I ever detect the slightest show of disrespect, or anything which in our opinion amounts to that, the individual concerned will lose his job there and then."

When Max returned from work that afternoon he came straight to my room.

“So how are you finding the air up here in Menako, bo Dennis?”

I thought he wanted to know how I was feeling now that he had taken me out of the bush, out of the slums of Mbongo to the luxury of his house in Menako. My shoulders shook up and down.

“I don’t know”.

“I came to tell you that some friends of mine will be coming here tonight,” he said. “I don’t know exactly how many but they will be many. It will be a sort of party and I would like you to be present because there will be a few people there who will be teaching you some of those G.C.E. subjects. Dr. William will be there. And I also expect some graduate Students from the Arts who will be helping, a certain Joackim and Nchenibo. Very good gentlemen to count on.”

When he looked at me I was sure that he saw some traces of confusion in my eyes.

“I have not spoken to you about him before?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Dr. Willie will, in fact run your programme. He will be the co-ordinator between you and his colleagues. I am sure you will like him. He is a most amusing man, but very intelligent too. Actually he runs an adult evening class in town where I am sure you might take some lessons.”

I gathered the pieces of papers before me in one heap and put them into the plastic bags under the table. I was not anxious to attend any party, but how was I going to say *no* to Max? Besides, I needed to meet my teachers.

“O.K,” I said.

“You could start getting ready as from seven,” he said.

“Then as I said to my boys in the morning, if you find any form of behaviour that makes you feel uncomfortable, don’t hesitate to tell me. Even if it is from Gertrude?”

“Bo Max, you mean she might do something like that to me?” I just wanted to be sure that I was right in my suspicious the previous evening.

“Oh maahh. I don’t imagine she would. But it is not an impossibility. I just want you to understand that there is no exception to the rule.”

“O.K.” I nodded.

The party took place in the sitting room. When all the guests were seated, eleven men and five women, Max came into my room to fetch me because I still had not come out.

“It’s time, bo Dennis.”

“O.K.”

“You will go in like that?”

I was still wearing the same jumpa I wore when we left Mbongo, the same pair of trousers and the same shoes.

“I should not wear it?”

“Well, if you like it, no problem,” he said. “What else were you thinking of wearing?”

“Nothing,” I said. It was obvious that Max was objecting to what I was wearing.

“Then you wear that. After all we are at home. But when we go out you must look smart. Coat and tie. You must know that you are about to be born again, so no jokes. If things must change then they must change. Feel free to take any of my coats on any occasion.”

We went into the parlour together. Drinks had long been served. As soon as we emerged from the room somebody shouted:

“C-o-u-r-t!”

There was a roar of laughter which made me almost freeze in my track. Could the joke have been cracked at my expense. Could Max have assembled the people and then brought me out to ridicule me, I wondered. I was just about to turn and go back into my room when Max pointed to the right and, without noticing the embarrassment on my face said:

“Bo Dennis, meet Professor Kenze.”

We shook hands, professor Kenze rising to his feet to greet me. I thought the respect was a mockery. I did not deserve it.

“This is my wife,” the professor said, turning towards her.

I bowed down and shook her hand, supporting my right hand with my left hand at the wrist the way we usually greet people of respect.

“Meet Dr. Amos,” Max went on.

Dr. Amos shook my hand from a sitting position, which was good for me. But he went on to ask:

“Doctor too?”

“No,” Max said. “Just a friend on leave.”

I moved on to the next guest, my whole instinct crying on me to revolt against any further greetings. I longed to retreat into my room and save both Max and myself any shame for I noticed how Max hesitated before answering to the question as to whether I was a doctor or not. But I moved on as though propelled by some unknown force. The man I was to greet next was the one who had shouted: “c-o-u-r-t!”

“Willie, here is your man,” Max turned to me:

“This is Dr. Willie Eshuonti.”

I had bowed down and stretched my hand towards the Doctor. The man took it with his left and then rising, shook it vigorously, saying comically:

“I am very pleased to meet you DOCTOR DENNIS!”

There was another roar of laughter.

“Don’t mind him,” Max told me. “Willie is always on the stage.” I remember this as one of the very few occasions in which Max was sensitive to something that caused me embarrassment.

“All the world’s a stage, and we are all actors. He who acts, lives. He who sits, dies,” Dr. Willie said. He heard what Max said to me about him. It was at this point that Max decided to call off the introductions. He seemed to have sensed that I was not at ease. He showed me where to sit and then he went to join his colleagues with whom they conversed for a very long time.

He also introduced Mr. Joakim and Mr. Nchenibo when they came in a bit later. I liked them. They did not sit far away from me, and they did not join the terrible things that the big men were saying. They sat only very briefly before discussing with Max and going away.

The drinks stood on the table and occasionally a boy went round with a bottle of beer or Whisky or Fanta, asking if anybody needed more. Generally people were free to go to the table and serve themselves. Max had his eyes on me as he conversed with his friends, perhaps just to see how comfortable I was among the strangers. He seemed to notice very quickly that I had not served myself. He went to the table and took a glass along with a bottle of beer which he brought over to me.

"Dennis, you don't seem to be drinking. Don't you know that all the beer and whisky must go?"

"Hmm, well, I...I..."

"No. Take this glass. I know you don't drink beer, but a doctor is now recommending it for you." He was smiling as he said so, perhaps to make me understand that he did not really mean it as a medical prescription. "Just a few drops in your Coke will get you into the right mood for enjoying this party."

He gave me the glass and then poured me some beer. He called for a bottle of Coke and asked me to mix it to my taste. He then pulled a side stool and sat by me. I sipped and drank and smiled a little involuntarily. After a few minutes Dr. William rose to the centre of the floor and began as if he had been talking for long:

"This one actually took place."

"Which one?" the people asked all at once.

"This story."

"Which story?"

"This Penis Competition." The people put their drinks down and stared up at him chuckling with visible anticipation of something obviously very amusing. Penis Competition! I wondered to myself.

“it took place in Argentina in 1905. It lasted two weeks. The Gold Medallist was an Ethiopian albino. Having given a good portion of his exhibit to the brother of his wife to carry for him, he himself came following. He reached ten full minutes after the carrier had piled the load down in front of the judges. He was lucky that between him and the brother-in-law, nobody attacked the python along the road. Guess who won the Silver Medal.” As Dr. William said this he threw his hand in Max’s direction and, since he was sitting with me, it looked as if the speaker was pointing at me.

There was general laughter once more. Really, what Dr. William meant, and what had actually caused the laughter was the appeal to Max to answer. He was not, as I later imagined, saying that I, Dennis, was the winner of the medal.

“William won the Silver,” Max answered back without looking at me. Had he done so he would have seen nothing else but mortification.

The people laughed again.

“Zero over ten,” Dr. William said.

“A Hawaian boxer won. A man as black as...”

“Charcoal,” somebody said.

“As the clitoris of a widow,” Dr. William corrected him.

“Language! Language!” Max shouted. He too was really enjoying the jokes.

“Call a spade a spade,” Dr. William told him. Then he went on: “The Bronze had gone to a Swiss youth of only nine who had been flown in from Italy to undergo a surgical operation...”

“That’s where I will disprove him,” Max said to me. “He thinks he knows more about Italy than myself.” I merely shook my head. I didn’t know whether I was the target or it was my presence that had made the people want to tell such bizarre tales and crack senseless jokes. But when I eventually looked round I found that nobody was even looking my way. Again, I believed that it was out of score that nobody cared to look at me.

The party ended towards midnight. I went to bed a very unhappy man. First of all, I did not enjoy the company of Dr. William. I saw nothing of the intelligence about him which Max had praised. I did not even find him amusing. I simply found him odious, loathsome, cruel. I had come into the room expecting to hear something, some conversation, some mature and intelligent jokes that would make a nonentity like myself feel the urge to learn. I had expected to hear what I would say if by some miracle I became a professor and was invited to a party – some conversation that would reflect the worth of the group as intellectual giants. The very last things I expected to be forced to listen to were obscenities.

And, see how everybody else was bursting with laughter! Yet I could not join that chorus. I was silent, without even a good dress, the excuse of a strong educational qualification, or an enviable social position to explain my contemptible moody reaction. Perhaps Dr. William was really a very funny man. Perhaps the jokes he told were indeed amusing. Perhaps they had nothing to do with me. Perhaps I, Dennis, was just too stupid to see what everybody else saw.

The party took place on Monday evening. On Wednesday, immediately after lunch, Max told me:

“I would like to speak to you in your room for a moment, bo.”

We went in and he placed a parcel on the table and said: “This is for you.”

“What is it, bo Max?”

“Open it and see.”

I pulled the strings around it and examined its contents: one pair of black shoes and a pair of sandals, a pair of pyjamas, a dressing gown, five white under wears, two shirts (one coloured and short-sleeved and the other plain white and long-sleeved), two pairs of trousers and two pairs of socks.

This parcel was Max's reply to a complaint Gertrude had made about me that morning, and which he himself may certainly have observed. It turned out that Gertrude had once suggested to Max that he should permit her to ask her brother to come and live with them and study for his G.C.E. Examinations.

The boy had visited them once and Max had found him so rude that he had thought it unwise to let him come and live there. Now, Max had not only chosen an outsider to benefit from his generosity but had given him more authority over the servants than he ever gave her, his wife. She concluded that the only way to make her position felt as the lady of the house was for her to send the stranger away. She was determined to prove to Max that he was wrong to have brought me there because I did not deserve any such favour. She therefore put a very special eye on every aspect of my life with the view to finding some fault which she could use to convince Max to hate me.

After observing my clothes critically for two days she decided that I had only one of everything- one shirt which I wore under my one jumpa, one pair of trousers, one pair of socks and one pair of shoes. It was true that I had only one of each item. As for my underwear, which she thought of with unconcealed nauseous irritation, she believed that either I had none at all or only one. It is understandable, she would argue with a steward, knowing that I was listening, for a man to wear the same shirt and perhaps the same shoes for a couple of days without washing them, although even that is not easily bearable. But for a man to wear the same underpants and socks for three days running without thinking of removing them to put in the sun! This she considered it dangerous, not only for health of the individual himself but also, and more especially, for that of those who like them are doomed through their own unthinking generosity to converse with me and even dine with me at the same table. Too bad.

I looked across at Max and then placed my hands on the things. I was too overwhelmed my some indescribable emotion to even say "Thank you." I was joyful and grateful, but above all I felt crushed by the favour which immediately brought to mind thoughts of my own utter helplessness. These were things I would have been able to do for myself and for other people, but for some unknown reason...

"I also have some stamps in here, bo Dennis." He gave me a packet of stamped envelopes. "I think it is not too early for you to write to your wife and tell her how we travelled and how you are finding the place."

"O.K. I will, bo Max."

"They will be glad to hear that you are really doing fine. Tell them everything is going according to plan."

"O.K." I wished I could tell anybody, even Max, that nothing was going according to plan.

"You should further arrange with her to visit you whenever you think it necessary. I will make money available to you for that purpose."

It was not a question to be answered, or a suggestion to be discussed. Max had just informed me, so I remained silent. I did not know what to say, or how to do so. Max placed his right hand on my left arm and said:

"And one more thing, bo Dennis, there are lots of things for you to learn along with preparing for exams, You need to be more open. You need to be able to mix freely."

"Why do you say so, bo Max?" How could I be open when the door of my life is shut? I asked myself.

"I have been observing you since we got here," Max explained. "You are too reserved. You don't enjoy jokes..."

"I do enjoy them..." I told him. Problem was I didn't recognize jokes any more. Max was not convinced about that.

"Well you do not show it," he said. "Your appreciation does not show on your face. I noticed that you were the only one in the party who was not laughing. This is very unlike what you used to be when we went to school. Or am I wrong?"

“Well, you are not wrong,” I admitted with much hesitation in my voice. I thought I could explain. “Only that I have just come, and all those people are big people.”

I couldn’t hide the fact that the status of the guests made me unable to laugh when I knew I had nothing.

“You must learn to feel free among them because for as long as you remain here you will always meet them.”

Max looked serious. “You will find them in all the parties we shall be attending,” he said. “You are already on your way up so you must look only up all the time.”

“I am on my way up, bo Max?” That made me smile a bit to myself. I was actually looking up as I talked.

“Of course,” he added. “You thought you were going down?” he asked smiling.

I too smiled dryly and said:

“I thought so.”

“No. Think straight,” he said.

He did not think there was a problem anywhere. I told him softly:

“Well, I will try.”

When Max left I took out the items in the parcel and threw them on the bed and stood looking at them. I was very glad that Max had bought them for me. But I wondered why he had not even asked me before going ahead to purchase them. I felt that I ought to be able to have a say in things that concern me.

Just then the door opened without a knock and who else came in but Gertrude!

“Godafternoon, madam,” I greeted, but I was afraid. I did not know why she had come but I suspected it was no friendly visit.

“Afternoon,” she answered and went to the bed and bending down over the clothes looked at them for a very long time.

“That’s good,” she said finally. She did not mean to praise what she had seen, I thought.

“Yes, Madam,” I said.

She went back out. I remained standing for several minutes, unable to guess what she had come to do and why she had looked so disappointed, why she had spoken those words. Without knowing why I decided that she meant that it was good for me to have been given clothes.

On the basis of this assumption I recalled my initial decision not to open my bag and change my clothes. It could never have been possible for anybody in that house to bear my presence in anything worse than what I had on. It would have been a mistake for me to change my clothes.

I took off the dirty threadbare jumpa and trousers, my old stinking pants and socks and carefully stuffed them at the bottom of my bag under the bed. I suddenly became ashamed to see or even think about anything I had ever owned in life. And before Max returned home that evening I had washed myself and dressed the way I thought they expected of me - in the new clothes. I tucked in my white shirt, even deliberately allowing a portion of the white pants to show above the belt at the back, and constantly bending down or turning round as if done unconsciously, in the hope that they would see and know that I had changed even the pants too.

Chapter Eleven

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

ON THURSDAY Max explained my study programme to me. I would start the coming week. I would attend general classes in the Adult Literacy Centre in town for one month. He said that, during that time, although I would be studying several subjects at the same time the emphasis would be on the sciences – S-C-I-E-N-C-E-S! For goodness sake!

During that time too I would be having special lessons in the laboratory at the university every Saturday afternoon. After that month, depending on my progress, my study would be cut down to Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, History, Geography, English Language and Literature, French and Economics. He said the courses in the sciences would be just introductory, until I shall have had a good understanding of what it was all about. It was Dr. William who had an understanding of what it was all about. It was Dr. William who was to take that decision. He was to tell me when to leave one level to the other. But anytime that his help was needed, Max made it clear that he would make himself available.

On Saturday morning I did not show up for breakfast at the usual time, 8 o'clock. I did not feel like it. When the steward came for me I complained that I had overslept. Before going to work Max came in to see me.

"I forgot to add this to the stamps I gave you Dennis," he said.

“When you write to your wife send her this.”

I showed my hands and he placed a 5,000 francs note in them. That was not all. He said again.

“You should also keep this in your pocket just in case you need to buy something.” It was another 5,000 francs. I thanked him.

“You don’t look very well, bo Dennis,” he said to me.

I responded somehow vaguely:

“Well, I am not sick.” Then I told him that there was something I had been trying to tell him.

He sat back down and said:

“You go ahead. Between us there should be no formality. Whenever you have something to say don’t hesitate. Don’t imagine that I would be too busy to listen. If I am around you just go ahead and ask. What is it?”

I knew that he would not like what I would say, but I had to. I told him:

“I want to leave this house, bo Max. I want to go and live in the boys’ quarters down behind there.” I made sure that he saw I was serious about it and there was some relief in seeing that he took me seriously.

Max had been carrying a file under his armpit. He flung it on the table and stared into my face with undisguised irritation.

“What do you mean, Dennis?” he shouted. I tried to repeat what I had said.

“I heard you all right,” he cut in. “The point is why would you think of such a dumb thing?”

I was not ashamed to say what I thought:

“That is where I belong.” My intention in saying this was not to annoy Max, so I fought hard to ensure that the expression on my face remained calm, inoffensive but resolute.

He stamped his fist on the table.

“You don’t belong there, Dennis. You belong here.” He was very angry.

I ground my teeth. And I was about to talk when he broke out.

"Boys' quarters? That I would go to Mbongo and bring my own friend to live in my boys' quarters?"

I thought I could convince him, I thought he would listen. He rose and pointing through the window said. "No. Look at the place. The mosquitoes and the like. And not just that. Look at what it means to us both. A man I have already introduced to the servants as the second master of this house! How..."

I thought it would be wrong for me to remain silent, so I interrupted him:

"It was a mistake you made, bo Max." I said.

"To have brought you here?" he turned and I sat up. I hesitated for a second. He had unconsciously said it all. But since a yes would have offended him severely, I said:

"Not that. Perhaps that too was a mistake. I meant that you made a mistake in introducing me to them as the second master of the house. You can see that I do not deserve being called a master. At least the servants see it so if you have not noticed it. A man who does not have anything. They earn salaries and so are even able to say they control their lives. What do I have? Not even myself. Not even an opinion."

At this point bitterness crept into my voice and I found it better to stop talking. Max sat back down and said a bit more softly:

"I am surprised at what you are saying, Dennis, and the way you feel about it. You should have pointed out to me that you did not like it..."

"I could not," I said. I knew that I could not.

"Why?" he asked.

I told him what I knew was the truth:

"When you called me out of the room I did not know what you were going to say. And when you started talking I could not stop you."

“But you should have done so. I did not bring you here to deprive you of your freedom of speech and action. I have told you over and over again that between us there ought never to be any formality...”

“There should be formality between us, bo Max,” I insisted. Why pretend? “I know that you love me and you are willing to do so much for me. But I also know that we are not equals in rank. I must respect you in the same way that people of my rank respect you, in the same way that the servants respect you.”

“There I completely disagree with you, Dennis,” he countered. “You ought to feel freer with me than any of those people you are talking about!”

Max would not see my problem. I thought I should not back down. I told him:

“Well, you don’t agree, but I have to do so.” Then after pausing for a moment I said: “And, I also like to suggest that if there is anything you want to do for me, let me know it. I know that I can never say *no* to anything that you suggest, but just tell me first. Even if it is buying something.”

“Did I wrong you in buying the things and giving them to you?” he asked the question that made me look ungrateful.

That was not true. I was not ungrateful. I told him:

“You did not. I am only talking about the future. Then, if you have anything to tell the servants about my position in the house, it will be better for you to tell your wife to do it.”

“My wife?” he smacked his lips.

“Yes,” I nodded

“Why?”

“If she can agree to talk on my behalf, she will not think that you are forcing me into the house.”

“Is that what she says I have been doing?”

“No,” I told him.

“Then what makes you say so?”

It was not the kind of thing you could say and prove it. It was just a feeling I had. I just said:

"I don't know, bo Max. I am just saying it."

"If that is what you want, I don't see any problem. But what I cannot swallow is the point of you moving from this..."

"I am just begging you, bo Max," I pleaded earnestly. We did not seem to be understanding each other. He saw only from his own point, and me only from mine.

"It should be me to beg you, Dennis," he said. "Imagine your wife coming here and finding you in the boys' quarters with all these rooms in the main house. Is there anything you need which has not been given to you in here?"

"Nothing," I told him, but I did not think that was the point.

"Is there anybody who has made your stay uncomfortable?" he asked.

I licked my lips several times. But said nothing. He was sure that I was thinking about something. He said:

"Very frankly, bo Dennis, tell me. Just who? What makes you want to do such an outrageous thing?"

"I cannot explain, bo Max," I said, and, in fact, I could not explain. "But I beg you. I just cannot live in here. Not that I want to offend you at all."

I knew that none of the things I would say would make sense to Max because he saw only the giving. There was, for instance, the gift of clothes which had completely changed my appearance. But it had not brought me the kind of relief and joy I had imagined it would bring when I wore them. It had only made a laughing stock of me. I had overheard Gertrude telling the servants that I could not wear an underpants properly. I had overhead one of the servants telling the other that he had seen me sleeping with my new shoes and new clothes on. He said I slept with them because, if I took them off, I would not be able to wear them correctly again. This was a wicked thing to say

about me. I always went to bed only with my pyjamas on. Such a story would never have arisen at all had the clothes never been bought. Then there was Gertrude herself again who had said to me:

“Mr. Dennis, these days you change clothes like a chameleon.”

If I could honestly compare myself to a chameleon, I would not have to be grumbling. But there was nothing in me to compare to a chameleon. The colours the chameleon changed were its own colours, not borrowed. I, Dennis, owned nothing. Outside the clothes, the clothes I was compelled to wear, I was nothing, meaningless flesh and bone. They wanted to give me substance, that was why they gave me clothes. They saw me only when I did not see myself. I knew that I still thought like my old, dirty self. I knew that no matter how often I bathed, I still smelt like my former self. I could therefore never run away from myself, from my true self - an object of ridicule, a diseased, stinking piece of bone and flesh.

My true self, half of my true self, lay buried in those tattered clothes and rotten underpants and socks at the bottom of my handbag under the bed. I was anxious to wear them again, to remind myself that I had not yet actually died, that I was still the same Dennis Nunqam, the wretched of the earth. I would like to wear the rags, even if it meant doing so after everybody else had gone to bed. I did not want Dr. William as my teacher. But I needed a place in which to make up my mind to tell Dr. Max about it. I needed a place to think of something to present as my reasons for refusing to have him as my teacher. I did not want to hear the sound of music and the wall clocks. I wanted to hear the crickets and the frogs at night. I did not want to live up in the sky when my true self still lay buried in the earth. I did not want to attend any more parties. I did not want to be introduced to anybody any more. I did not want to live

near enough for Max to remind me of Komen-dor by entering the room late at night just to make sure that I had not escaped. I only wanted to be left alone. I had not come to be seen because nobody could see me without insulting me.

"Are you serious, bo Dennis?" he asked after reflecting for a long time.

"Bo, Max, I am. I am very serious."

Max saw that my mind was irrevocably made up. He would allow me to have things my own way – for better or for worse. After all, it was his plan to co-operate with me to any extent to make me live and study the way I thought most convenient.

"When do you think you would like to go there?" he enquired.

"Today," I told him.

He did not agree.

"It can't be today, Dennis," he said. "And you can't live with my boy. The house has to be washed and painted and disinfected. And that takes time..."

"They don't need to do all that," I told him. "I have seen the place. They only have to sweep it."

Max was already getting late for work for, he kept glancing at his watch. He sent for Aruna, the boy who occupied the room and told him bluntly:

"You will leave that room where you live this morning. From now until further notice it will be occupied by my friend. Mr. Dennis. Make it perfectly clean as soon as possible. Arrangements will be made to house you elsewhere."

Aruna agreed without complaining. But he did not look happy because Dr. Max had not treated him well. When Max went over to the room to tell Gertrude about the change I overheard Aruna grumbling. He was saying something which Max was too far away to understand. This made Max come back out to enquire about what Aruna had said.

Aruna hesitated. I had been standing near the servants and had heard Aruna say:

“Whose cana big man wey i de wan daso fo drav pipo fo boy-boy kwata?”

But when Max asked a servant what Aruna had said he confessed that he too had not heard him properly. Max was annoyed. He concluded that Aruna had actually insulted his friend and that they were reluctant to tell him because they feared the consequences. He decided that unless he set an example at once on one of them they were most likely to make a laughing stock of me, now that I had decided to quit the main building.

Max told Aruna he was dismissed and went on to give definite instructions about how the room was going to be prepared for me. This, he asked the drivers and the cook to take charge of.

I did not like the way the problem of my transfer had been effected. Gertrude did not seem surprised by the news that I was leaving the house. On my part, I was not surprised that she was not surprised. In fact, she cheerfully exclaimed.

“Good riddance.”

It was the news of Aruna’s dismissal that drove her to madness and rage because it meant that they were going to live for another year without a houseboy. I got to hear it was not easy to find a houseboy in Menako if one was not a native of the place. She therefore contradicted Max’s orders. She said that the bed in the visitor’s room where I had been sleeping was not to be taken to the boys’ quarters. She argued:

“If a man wants to stay in a place he should be ready to use the things inside the house. After all, in what way is he better than Aruna whom he has sent away? Boys are hard to get these days. And the only one you manage to find, you bring a man to feed and clothe and do all for, he rewards you by driving him away, so that you should wash your things yourself, and sweep the house yourself. Nonsense.” I had

been listening from the balcony above and knew that Gertrude had seen me there before talking to the workers. I went down to her and begged.

"Madam, forgive me. I am very sorry for it. I did not drive..."

"You did," she spat in throttled anger.

"Madam, forgive me." I pleaded. "I shall have nothing to do in the house while here so I can always help you to do all those things that he used to do. I am really very..."

"If you do his work you are not helping me in any way. It is yourself you are helping because we are doing everything for you. Everything. Free."

I remained silent. When Max returned that afternoon and found that the plank bed he had given specific instructions to be replaced by the bed in the visitors' room had been made for me, he almost dismissed the men who had worked at it, had I not intervened. Knowing what a stain it was going to cause on his relationship with his wife if Max knew the truth, I lied in front of Gertrude and the servants that it was I myself who chose to sleep on the bed. I added:

"If a visitor drops in suddenly now he might not have a sleeping place, that is why I said they should leave it. Besides, bo Max, I am used to sleeping on plank beds. I have been sleeping on them ever since I was born."

"But you cannot do that here, bo, no matter how you feel. Imagine what it would look like if your wife should come here now and see how you are living. It is disgraceful."

He gave 20,000 francs for a very comfortable bed to be bought from town for me that afternoon.

But this did not make me any happier. Nor did it heal the wound between me and Gertrude, who decided just the very next day that I should start doing what I had offered to do. She brought a heap of clothes which she dumped on the floor in my room as soon as Max went to work and asked me to wash them. When I carried them to the sink and started sorting them I found that there were four of her dirtiest under pants and two brassieres.

I abandoned the clothes there and went up to the parlour where she was sitting. As soon as she saw me enter, she enquired:

“Have you finished washing the things?”

“I have not, madam. And I don’t think I shall wash them.

I don’t think I shall ever be willing to wash anything in this house again.”

I was careful not to raise my voice.

“But you offered to wash them yourself,” Gertrude said, now afraid of the severity in my voice. She had never thought that I was capable of such firmness.

“I offered to wash them, madam, as a help, not as punishment. I don’t know what I have done wrong.”

“Who said it is punishment?”

“It cannot be anything else, madam. I don’t wash my wife’s underwear. I don’t know what I have done to you to deserve washing yours.” I walked out. I had not completely died. There was still some man in me.

Chapter Twelve

*

Maximillian Essemo Alekwienchaa

ON THE 15th of July I received a communiqué from the Ministry of Education. I was being invited to attend a seminar of the World Health Organisation in Geneva. My friend had already begun classes at Willie's Evening School. He had been attending for a week. Very big relief for us all, that he finally settled down because, for quite a while, he did not speak of Willie with the same warmth that I felt.

"It will last for at least six weeks," I told Dennis, when he asked to know for how long I would be away. "But my absence should have no effect whatsoever on your study programme," I said. "You are in very good hands."

"I am going to leave you enough money and a blank cheque, should you require more than I have estimated.... If you have any problems concerning your room, food and so on, Gertrude will take care of it."

He held down his head as I spoke. But that didn't mean a thing. It did not take me long to conclude that it was his own way of listening. Only that when he raised his head his lips seemed curled in a smile in which I discerned some scorn. Again, this fellow was such a bunch of puzzling reactions that you could spend your whole bloody life trying to make sense of any one of them.

"And in case it concerns any items on your studies, Willie will take care of it. He knows about that already. The programme had been drawn. Those two gentlemen I showed

you at the party here the other time, I mean Nchenibo and Joackim who you said have been here to talk to you. They will be ready to help. If, for some reasons, you find that you are uncomfortable in the midst of the others in class in town, mention it to Willie and other arrangements would be made, even if it means having your lessons here at home. You could also write to your wife to come and keep you company. I will write to her from Geneva, but I will send her no money. You will decide how much money you think she would need for coming here and mail it to her. Let her come with the children if possible.”

Early September, I was back. Very brief trip that was. I wrote a couple of letters from Europe: to Manda, Gertrude, Willie. I think I made an error in being too precise about my hour of returning home. I mobilised them unduly especially as there was a last minute change of schedule. How they must have waited for me at the airport! I was not surprised, therefore, when I saw no face I recognized as one of them when I arrived so late. Well, so late, not because it was very late into the night but because I said I would be coming at 9am. But the plane finally touched down at 10pm. If you know what I mean.

Clearing customs, and all that bullshit, I got home at 11 pm. Everybody was asleep. They go to bed early, these fellows, I thought. Not too late to ring up Willie. Honestly, there was that nagging feeling to know how Dennis was getting on. Good to know that before I met Dennis himself in the morning.

“That must be very unfair, bo Max, to trick all of us to that extent,” Willie said to me the moment he recognised my voice. “Were you afraid that we would assassinate you? The whole faculty turned up for you at the appointed hour.”

I explained the reason for the delay.

“Anyway you are very welcome back. How was the trip?”

“Perfect. I really enjoyed it. It was such a great relief from the pressure of work here. How have things been? How is you man faring?”

“Dennis?”

“Ya, how is he doing?”

I heard Willie strike a match. Sure he was lighting his cigar, because there was no answer. I heard him pull at it for a long considering moment and then exhale a deep puff.

“Why don’t we talk about this in the morning. Max?”

There was a cadence in his voice that made me momentarily nervous.

“Are you kidding? I come in and call in the middle of the night to find out something and you say tomorrow? Are you guested or something?”

“You have just arrived and certainly need a rest.”

“You are not a doctor of Medicine, Willie, You know that.”

“I know, Max. But even in Education we know the value of rest.”

I laughed. I heard him laugh too from the other end. For a second. When we next spoke there was a note of restraint on both sides.

“Anything unsettling about the answer you would give, Willie?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. But...”

“But what? How is he doing. Willie?”

“Badly.”

“How badly?” I sighed, ground my teeth and soon my lower lip was between my teeth. “Look, bo Willie, why don’t you come over right away and...”

“Heh, Max, why? If you really want to have us talk about it this night why don’t I come instead?”

“That’s okay by me. I am waiting then.”

Within ten minutes Willie arrived. Stone’s throw – eh? Then the bad part!

"I could not get myself to write to you about Dennis' programme while you were still in Geneva because I know what this gentleman's success means to you."

I was not the easiest man on this planet to ruffle. No kidding about that. But I found myself repeatedly rearranging my sitting position and trying very unsuccessfully to relax as best I could while Willie spoke. I felt my mind assailed on all fronts with strange foreboding.

"None of those plans which we drew up for Dennis is feasible, even in the foreseeable future. At least not under the present circumstances. We had hopes of sending him to the medical school some day, not so?"

Had? Why past tense? I nodded, my face devastated with incomprehension.

"Something else has to be worked out - at once."

"What are your reasons precisely?"

"He is too distracted, Max."

Distracted? Could Willie be more precise?

Of course I did. Otherwise why entrust an affair so delicate into his hands?

"Why do you say so?"

Willie lit another cigar and smoked for a minute or two.

"I had to ask because what I have to say is mainly inferred from actions that might be interpreted in an entirely different light. I will talk first about the Saturday lab sessions. He has broken over 200 test tubes and a countless number of beakers within the last month. We have never seen damage at this frightful rate. I mention this, of course, not because the things cost money. After all money is not the issue. It is the cause of the damage that amazes me. You will find him tomorrow with a bandaged arm. He sustained the burn while pouring some acid into a beaker..."

"A beaker! From a drum or what?" Again my lower lip went between my teeth. The spittle in my mouth began to taste sour. Perhaps I had wounded the lip.

“Do you know how much absence of mind it takes to miss the mouth of a beaker?”

The ghost of a smile flickered about my mouth.

“You will find half his clothes bleached here and there. He can’t touch a liquid container without spilling it. I can’t understand, but I think we should not give him the opportunity of pouring some of the liquid down his throat one day.”

I winced as if I could feel the acid on my body.

“And what about the theory? How does he perform in the classroom? How does he respond?”

“With Dennis, bo, you don’t talk of response.”

“How do you mean? I hope you are not exaggerating anything, Willie?”

“Of what good should that be to me? After all if he finally passed and entered the university that would only increase the prestige of my school.”

“What then do you mean by saying that he does not respond?”

“We have both done some psychology and we have both found ourselves in a situation when we can read the minds of students or patients or whoever. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you call on somebody to do something and, even without his saying so, he makes you feel as if you were singling him out for ridicule or something of the sort?”

“Several times.”

“Then, also, have you ever found yourself in a situation where you decline from calling on somebody to answer a question just because you feel he might not know the answer and so save him the embarrassment of an awful answer?”

I had cause to smile.

“And have you gone away with the impression that the man you refrained from embarrassing really thought you were ignoring him because he is not worth talking to?”

"Is that what has happened?"

"That and much more which I cannot describe. With Dennis in your class you never know what to do. Mark you, I have not said he is dull."

"Does he not pay attention?"

"Attention is not the problem. He does not talk at all..."

"I have noticed that myself."

"I wish he could. His assignments, that is the most disturbing part of it. At first I thought it was because he was new in the place. But there seems to be no change. Give him something to do, he begins quite well, but after a few lines, what follows is as if he had written under duress. No relation to what came before. When you take up a paper he has written, it looks like after a careful commencement of a dream, the writer was interrupted and so could never find the threads again."

I could only nod.

"Can I see one of them tomorrow?" I asked him.

"I have some in my car."

He went out and brought me two copies. I looked at them for a very long time.

"There is something terribly wrong with his mind," I concluded. "What of Joackim and Nchenibo? What do they say about his performance in History and Literature?"

"You have a rest, Max. I will ask them to come to the office in the morning and meet you."

"I wish I could see them this night!"

"Have a rest, Max. You'll see them in the morning."

But Willie was the co-ordinator. He should have some idea about what the others thought.

"Their views don't differ much from mine."

"He is not doing fine, then? Even in Literature and History?"

Willie pulled down the sides of his mouth and shook his head several times.

“Not at all.”

The last words that night were the worst. He said:

“I must be frank. If you want to help Dennis without feeling too upset with his progress, send him back to Mbongo and ...”

“Ask Dennis to go back? What a dumb thing to contemplate! What problem shall I have solved. Would that not be just plain killing him? He cannot go back, unless, perhaps he personally makes the request.”

“Then I should expect him to make such a request one of these days.”

What a way to welcome me back home!

Chapter Thirteen

*

Maximillian Essemo Aleukwienchaa

HAD I not slept on the plane I would have run into serious problems because I scarcely closed my eyes after Willie returned home that night. I decided several times in the night to go down to Dennis' room and talk to him, but changed my mind. As soon as it struck seven, I ran down to see him.

"I returned very late last night, bo," I told him apologetically. He must not know I have enquired about his progress.

"And you did not call to see me?"

That was Dennis asking me. Can you believe that?

"We waited at the airport as you said in your letter," he said again.

"Too bad I couldn't make it." I told him. "If I was the one piloting that plane I should have made sure that I kept to my promise. We had problems," I told him.

He folded his hands.

"Besides, you were asleep by the time I finally reached home here."

"I was not asleep," he said softly. "I kept wondering whether you would come or not. But I am glad that you have come. How was your journey?"

Dennis asking me about my journey? I could not believe my ears. Finally, I thought, we were making some progress.

“Wonderful,” I told him. “The trip was good. A little bit more demanding than I had thought, but all the same very useful. In fact, I am looking forward to going back there again. Did your wife come here?” I asked him. He hesitated for a moment, which made me worried. Then he answered:

“She did not come.”

I looked at him. He could see the surprise in my looks.

“I did not see any reason why she should come,” he said.

“I know when I will ask her to come.”

The choice was his, I thought.

He seemed to be in high spirits, which made me feel excited too. Willie may, after all, be rash in concluding. I therefore did not think there was anything wrong in asking him about his work. “So how are your studies? I enquired.

“I don’t know,” he answered.

Did he hear me? Did he understand me? I was not asking him about any other person’s studies. I was talking about HIS.

“do you think you will be ready for the G.C.E. paper next January as we were thinking? I pressed on.

“I don’t know,” Dennis said.

I pushed the pile of papers on the table and sat on it, facing him. Then I looked over his back to the cupboard to the far corner. There were some two large papers on which Dennis had drawn and painted something on them. One of them was hanging over the side of the cupboard so that you could see what looked like the branch of a tree. It also looked like a hand with very long fingers. Anyway, that did not interest me much. I did not ask him what it was he had drawn because I knew how he would take it, knowing that I had just been talking to him about his studies. And, in fact, that was how I felt. I thought that he had been wasting valuable time on drawing instead of doing something that would help him in future, reading his book and doing his homework.

I was looking at him as I thought all this. Then as my eyes went round his body it occurred to me that I saw part of a plaster. I bent down and examined it closely. I was right, there was a plaster over a wound. That wound Willie talked about!

"Is that a wound?" I asked.

"Yes, it is a wound," he admitted.

His answer came rather reluctantly.

"I wounded it, I, I, hit it against the door," he stammered as if I had accused him of some form of carelessness. If I saw my friend wounded, I had the right to enquire how that came about. But I was not asking like an adult would ask a child, so the way he responded made me feel somehow guilty.

"But it is well now," he said.

So he was still thinking about it, I asked myself. I then rose and stepped down from the table and began to walk away. At the door I thought he may need something. "Did you have any particular problem that requires my help?" I asked him.

Dennis shook his head. If I had not been looking at him I would not have known that he even heard me because he did not open his mouth. After a very long pause he said in his throat:

"Only food."

"Food?" What problem would he have with food? "The food gave you constipation or what?" I asked Dennis.

"I said I would like to be having my food in here," he said. I did not see anything wrong with that.

"That's okay," I told him. "But did you have any problems with that arrangement?"

Again he shook his head most imperceptibly. I walked back and asked him whether he got on well with Gertrude.

"Well, I think so," he said. But I could discern a note of indifference in his answer. The kind of indifference which carries with it the implication of: "Even if I don't like her, what can I do?"

He did not tell me that Gertrude had once given him her underwear to wash, and that he had gone to rebuke and reproof her for that; that after that occasion she had been so haunted by the fear of Dennis telling me that she had begun to treat him with unusual respect, until she discovered that Dennis had never had the intention of reporting her to me. He did not tell me that Gertrude had banned him from setting foot in the main building as soon as I left for Geneva.

*

My next stop when I left Dennis was the university campus. I wanted desperately to know how Dennis was doing, from his two tutors. I could not wait for them in the office as Willie had said. I went to their own office. The young men were together. That saved me the trouble of repeating myself here and there. I asked them about his progress, whether they thought he would make it at the time we had estimated and things of the sort.

I tried my best to be light-hearted, to make it look like it was not a matter of life-and-death, so that they should not think that a negative answer would break my heart. But it was no use pretending because the two young men knew what Dennis' success meant to me psychologically, at least.

"Perhaps he will make it," Nchenibo said rather noncommittally.

"Only perhaps?" I asked. The expression on his face bothered me. It gave me the impression that he had not actually said what he would honestly have said.

"Or what else can I say, Dr. Essemu?" he asked. "I think to even say perhaps, in a case of this nature, is, to be, in fact insincere."

I did not like what I was hearing. My first was correct, that the man was concealing the truth. I decided to think differently, to consider his answer ambiguous.

“Insincere in that he is obviously good or bad?” I asked. Nchenibo rubbed it in.

“Obviously bad,” he said. “Bad is not even the word, Dr. Essemo. That your man is enigmatic, if you know what I mean.”

“Let me know what you mean,?” I said. Believe me, I felt terrible, especially as Willie had said the same thing. I pulled my chair nearer the table and leaned on my right hand with my elbow supporting my head, looking at the two men. Bravado! I switched on a smile to say it did not hurt to hear that.

“He is not passing your test or what?”

“Not that,” Nchenibo said. He was going to say something else, but it occurred to me that I had completely left him out of the discussion. I noticed that he was nodding as Nchenibo was talking, as though he supported what his friend was saying.

“Do you have the same experience, too?” I asked Joackim.

“Exactly the same, Doctor,” the man said. I went back to Nchenibo:

“You were trying to say something when I cut you short...”

“Yes, doctor,” he said.

“What was that?”

“I wanted to say, and I want doctor to take this statement as coming from my heart, as my own personal assessment that could be wrong, but which is honestly given, that History is not the right subject for Mr. Dennis.”

I blew out a puff of air and looked from one face to the other. I didn’t know when I put my right thumbnail into my mouth. I only realized it when it got stuck in the gap between my two upper front teeth. I nodded to Nchenibo to show that I was listening. He had not even said the worst, it would appear.

“Doctor,” he went on, determined to give me all. “If you don’t mind the expression, I think there is a vital screw missing in your friend’s whole being, from his system. I don’t know what that is, but I know something is missing.”

Vital screw, I repeated the words to myself. That could mean a whole lot of things, so I needed some precision, some specifics.

“What does he really do,” I asked, “to make you draw such a damaging conclusion? You are a teacher,” I said. “Talk to me like a teacher laying a complaint to a parent who is anxious to know about the progress of his child. You know Dennis is my candidate.” What Nchenibo said next I would never forget.

“Know that I am a teacher,” he began, “and you are like a father to Mr. Dennis. But I cannot pinpoint a particular weakness, say an inability to interpret facts, or organize material and things of the sort. If that were the case it would be quite a different matter altogether. But it is not that. He does not even give one the opportunity to know what is really wrong within him.”

“I was about to say the same thing,” Joackim stepped in on his own. If I was honest with myself I would have said these two men had encountered practically the same problems that I was facing with Dennis.

“He seems to me to have a serious emotional or, let’s say, a psychological problem,” Joackim went on.

Psychological problem! I said to myself. Then what good was I as a doctor if I could not diagnose a psychological problem?

“I am listening,” Joackim continued in the same merciless tone, “he gives you the impression that he is listening. But ask him a question and then you would discover that even though he had been looking at you, you had been actually speaking to yourself, that he had instead been watching something happening faraway.

"For instance, I was talking to him last time about the growth of the English novel. At one point, after having talked for long I wanted to be sure he was following, so I asked him very casually whether he had read anything by Daniel Defoe, even in the abridged version. You know what he said?"

"No," I said.

"God's time is the best."

"God's time is the best how?" I asked.

"Mr. Dennis, answering to the question whether he had read anything by Daniel Defoe, said, God's time is the best."

Joackim was shaking with laughter, his eyes watering as he tried fruitlessly to conceal in. Even Nchenibo too was fighting hard not to laugh. Finally he exploded and immediately apologized:

"Doctor, you must think us cruel to laugh at such a thing. But sometimes you cannot help laughing at it. Excuse us. It is bizarre."

I told them it was Okay. I understood that it might be impossible not to find something to laugh at in the whole situation. But for me it was not funny. It was painful. It was mind-shattering. The two men looked at each other for a moment, and then Nchenibo decided to add to what his friend had said, perhaps to justify his laughter.

"It seems as if my friend is telling my exact story about Mr. Dennis, Doctor."

"Well," I said. "How is it the same?"

"I brought him to this office one day last week, it was a Wednesday, I remember. He was sitting just where you are sitting now. But he was looking at the wall. You see, he has this interesting habit of looking at the wall or up at the roof, never directly at you."

"Or just staring at the ground in front of him," Nchenibo added.

“That’s r-i-i-i-ght,” Joackim nodded and went on. “So I asked him whether he was following the lessons so far. He said he was. But I could swear he was not telling the truth. His expression had remained unaltered throughout the whole hour that I was talking history to him. I had been talking about the Industrial Revolution, and I had consciously made the lesson very amusing by using interesting examples. But he would listen and nod at the most unlikely places. I asked him a question. I have forgotten what. He stared at my feet for one whole minute. I thought he was thinking to the answer. Then suddenly, from nowhere, he asked me: “What is your age?”

“What is your age?”

“I was baffled. Doctor, if what I am saying is a lie, let me cut my tongue from my mouth...”

“Don’t swear please,” I entreated him. “Nobody doubts what you are saying. It is just that some of it puzzles me.”

“So when he asked you your age, what did you say?”

Nchenibo asked.

Again you could sense laughter welling up in his throat.

“What could I say?” the man asked. “I looked at him too for a while and then told him that I was twenty-six.”

“And what did he do?” I asked.

“He smiled that his kind of dry smile, gave a heavy sigh and went into his blanket again..”

“Blanket?”

“Well, doctor, that is just a word I throw in to describe his silence. He always sits as if he is lying inside a blanket, not wanting to be seen or heard... I remember the question I asked him. I asked him if he thought the Industrial Revolution was on any real importance to the people of Britain at that particular time.”

The whole scenario sounded unreal to me, though I could see that the young men were talking in earnest. That Dennis had a problem was no news. I was the first person to notice that. But maybe I did not take it serious enough. And now

it was degenerating into a kind of, I don't know what. I decided to go back to Dennis to convince myself of the gravity of the matter. For some reason I found it hard to believe all what they had just said.

*

Dennis had been sitting on the edge of the bed when I knocked and came in. He rose but fell back on the bed as if his legs had lost the strength to carry him. He struggled to his feet again and walked up to the table and pulled a chair for me to sit down, his eyes averting the dark implacable stare in mine. I thanked him but did not sit. I supported myself on the backrest on the chair and asked to see his workbook and exercise books on the various subjects. He dragged himself round me to the corner of the table and returning said:

“Here is it.”

Had he heard me properly? I had always been very careful not to talk to Dennis from a position of obvious seniority, to be habitually pleasant with him. But now I had to be severe. I didn't have to make as if all was fine. How could I say what he was doing did not annoy me, that it was perfectly normal? No way!

“Books,” I said. My voice was loud, and I hated to notice that. I added stress on the SSSS sound to indicate that I wanted more than one book. I could feel perspiration on my face as I stood, looking from him to the exercise book.

“I don't know where the rest are,” Dennis said.

I did not insist. I took the one he had brought and threw the pages open, glanced through them rapidly and then closed it again. What was there to see anyway? I threw it on the bed, turned the chair round and asked him too to sit down.

He sat on the bed. I told him what I thought was the truth in it all.

“Let me tell you what you don’t want to say about those books,” I began. “All those exercise books are in here, and you know that. You are ashamed to produce them because they are blank. Because you have not done with them what you were supposed to. You have not done your assignments.”

Dennis was sitting and looking down at his feet, his hands folded over his chest. He sat like a condemned infant before an adult. The sight made me feel awfully bad. Doing that to somebody I had brought to help!

“Come over and sit on this chair, bo Dennis,” I said. He seemed at first to hesitate. But he came all the same. I pulled another chair and placed it in front of mine and told him to sit down. He came and sat down almost mechanically.

“Relax, bo Dennis,” I said. “I want you to listen to me.”

I rose and went out of the house and called for Belinda and told her that if anybody rang for me she should come for me down there. As I was returning to the house I was telling myself that I must take the bull by the horns. Take the bull by the horns. Take the bull by the horns. When I came in I began even before I sat down:

“Bo Dennis, I have to be very frank with you. First, let me ask you this: Do you feel it is wise for me to talk to you raising my voice? Do You think it is right for me to come into your room and order you to look for your books and submit to me?”

Dennis lifted his head, looked at me and then allowed the head to fall without an answer.

“Tell me, is it right?” I asked again.

“I don’t know,” he said.

I found the answer very irritating. It made me feel more guilty than I did before I asked him the question.

“If you don’t know, I know,” I told him. “I know it is improper. But your conduct makes it imperative for me not to do otherwise. And I find that I have to do this because I know it is for your own good. If I had never thought of helping you if you had never been in such a helpless state,

and if I had never thought that you could benefit from coming here, you should have been resting in your own house in Mbongo. Starving, perhaps. But we agreed that you should come here and learn. The idea was never that you should abandon your family and come here and become a source of embarrassment either to yourself or to anybody else.

I had to tell it as it was. I did not care anymore how he would react to what I was saying and how I was saying it. It did not matter how my voice sounded in his ears. If at all he was listening, that is.

“Perhaps you think the Government employed me here and made me the Head of the Teaching Hospital so that I could sit at home and talk to you every blessed day on the same thing. Or so that I could spend my whole life running between Mbongo and Menako for your sake.”

“If you think so, then you are wrong. You will not believe the number of patients I see every day, on top of my administrative duties. You don’t know how many documents I sign every day. And signing them means reading them. I have to attend meetings, and I have, above all, to amuse myself. So you see that this your burden which I have taken on has cost me and is still costing me much. Very much. And you are doing practically nothing to make the burden light for me.”

I threw open the pages of the book he had given me and enquired:

“What are these lines criss-crossing all over the place like this? What is wrong with you? What has happened to your once so great mind?”

He did not answer.

“I have just been to see your tutors, and they are of the same opinion about you. They think that you cannot concentrate, is that true?”

“It is true,” he answered in a voice that turned my anger into sympathy.

“And why is it not so?” I asked. At this moment I regretted not doing psychiatric medicine. But you could do a thing like that and never find anybody to practise on!

“It cannot be because of the absence of your family,” I concluded. “I have told you that you should ask them to come here at any time that you wish. It cannot be the family. And if it is not the family, what else can it be? Just what is on your mind, bo Dennis, tell me. What is it?”

I could see him breath rapidly in and out and then settle down in his silence again. Then just as I was trying to talk again he said:

“Bo Max, I just don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? There are two things at stake here. You don’t know what is on your mind or you don’t even know if there is something on your mind at all?”

He rubbed his nose with the back of his right hand. Not a word issued from his mouth. There was no doubt in my mind that he knew what everybody – that is, his teachers, his wife and me – expected him to do. He knew that we expected him to sit down, give his undivided attention, be taught, pass his exams, get a degree and return to meet his wife and children. As soon as possible. But it would appear that between what he was doing and what he knew he ought to be doing, something stood. Something unknown, something intangible, but at the same time substantial, something corrosive. I could not, by the stretch of any imagination guess what that something was!

“Okay, bo Dennis,” I resumed. “This is what I think you are suggesting by your actions. You believe that you are not happy here, that, as you yourself said the other time, it was a mistake for me to have brought you here, and that you will be better off back with your family in Mbongo. So I...”

“It is not that I want to go back, it is not that you made a mistake, bo Max...” he tried to persuade me.

"If that is not the case," I said, "then you prove that I did not make a mistake. Or prove that you deserve being here. And the only way to prove it is for you to work and pass your exams."

I fixed my eyes on him. He seemed to be trying to think out an answer to the challenge I had just thrown at him. The room was heating up, I took off my coat and hung it behind the chair. I also undid the tie and three buttons on my shirt. Dennis did not seem to bother about the heat.

"I don't want to go to Mbongo," he said.

"Are you sure about that" "I asked him.

"I really don't want to go back there life that."

"Then you will not go," I assured him. "Let us begin again," I said. "I want you to forget about the fact that we were once classmates, forget about the fact that you once taught me, that, as our teachers used to say, I was the goat and you the sheep. Things have changed, completely, and we have to admit the fact. I have to say things because I have drawn one conclusion about you from what has been said to me. You are far too busy assessing people, instead of listening to them. Nobody else knows what you once were, what you would have become, so don't let that get in the way of your studies. When somebody is teaching you, listen to him, irrespective of his age. Don't imagine that he will be asking himself what you were doing all this time that you were only coming to learn at that particular time. Your past life is now history, and you cannot change it..."

Dennis' eyelids seemed to dilate and he looked at me as if to ask how I came to know what was on his mind.

"Yes, I mean what I say," I told him. "All you need to do now is to continue from where you are now, from the few things those young men were trying to teach you. You lose all your power of concentration if you do not keep irrelevances out of your thoughts. You get my point?"

Dennis nodded.

“I will undertake to teach you myself,” I told him. “Every evening when I return from work, we shall have a lesson or two. You will be given regular assignments which you will be required to finish and hand to me personally. How does that sound?”

“Well, I think it is good,” he said. “it sounds good.” He had agreed, but then, as I went back upstairs I began to ask myself whether he had agreed because he genuinely thought it was good or because the question was weighted to produce an answer in the affirmative. In any case I decided the former possibility was the right one.

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

Who said wonders shall end? Never. That it was not the people hired by Max who will teach me, but Max himself. Maximillian Essemole Aleukwieunchaa himself, Maximillian the goat! For Christ’ sake. A man who could never add two and two! Who was I to say *no*? I said *yes*, and sat back to see the miracle.

Every night we were there, we were there. And, what was worse, Max would talk like Ayomba himself, whenever he said those his things and I could not tell what he had said:

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again!”

“Forward ever, backward never!”

and things of the sort. Was that possible? Which way was my world going? Were those not the same words that Ayomba had used? What did I do to God almighty, that he should make me listen without giving me the chance to repeat them to anybody? I told myself, and I knew in my heart of hearts that the thing would not work. Not even if I lived ten times the span of my own life. One day I thought I should tell him, so I did.

"Bo Max," I said, "I don't think this thing will work. Do you think I can ever learn anything?"

I am sure that Max himself knew that what I had said was true. But he tried to give me encouragement. And I also began to believe.

"If you do your best you will succeed," Max said, as if nothing had happened in my life since we parted. There was a load on my mind which I thought he should know of.

"I try to do my best," I told him. "But something is happening. Something."

"What thing/" Max asked.

What could I say?

"Don't you remember things again?" he asked me. True, my problem had to do with remembering. But it also had to do with forgetting. I told him:

"I remember, bo Max. But I remember only the things which I should forget. And forget those I should remember. I keep thinking, keep thinking, thinking, thinking, but nothing."

"Thinking about what?" he asked me.

"About people," I said. "All my friends. All the people I knew are something."

"That's the more reason why you should try to succeed," he said, "so as to catch up with others. Put your shoulder to the plough..."

"Put your shoulder to the plough!" Max said.

That was Ayomba again talking through him. But that was not all. I knew I had been to prison. I knew too that nobody who had been to prison could ever succeed. So what was I to do? Tell Max? Tell him so that he would parcel me and send me back to Mbongo? A place I no longer wanted to set eyes on? I did not want anybody from Mbongo to set eyes on me again. Not even my wife, not even the children. But why was that so? I would smile to myself when I asked myself these questions sometimes.

Doctor Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem! I had never heard of a doctor with such a name. I could never become a doctor. Max himself ought to know that I was not the kind of stuff from which doctors were made. The only thing that mattered was drawing. When I painted I felt fine. When I mixed my colours it was to me as if I was passing among people, but without touching them, which was what I always wanted to do. It was as if I was seeing everybody, but nobody was seeing me. It was Max himself who gave up. I know that I was not listening when he was talking, but after the first month he never had time any more. He would return very late at night, after I had been waiting for him for hours. He would tell me how he had attended meetings. And it was really true that he was attending meetings. But that was why I said the thing could not work.

Sometimes we would be working together – I say working as if I worked – then he would receive an urgent call. And that would be the end for that day. But his absence helped me to make my drawing, to mix my colours, to describe people with my colours, to add to that my wonderful file. He himself noticed that I was enjoying the paintings, and did not ask me why I spent the money on the paints as before. It was just around this time that my work was going well that Max said he was going to Mbongo! If I had my way I would tell him not to go there. What was he going to find out about? Whether I had been to prison or what? No, it could not be that. Did I look like an ex-convict? Why did Max abandon the medicine programme and encourage me to continue with my paintings?

“Let us review the past months that we have been together here,” he said, before he was to leave for Mbongo. “Let us see whether the original plan is still feasible,” he said. “What do you think you really want to become?”

To say anything else would just mean that Max had wasted his time and money.

“Medicine,” I said. “I want to be a doctor.”

“You should do art instead,” Max said. That was as I feared. To accept to do art was the first step towards sending me away from the house. How could Max come so far down from medicine.”

Chapter Fourteen

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

ON THE eve of Christmas there was going to be a party, they called it a very special party for the Menako VIPs in the Provincial

Governor's Lodge. Max and his entire family were invited. When he got the invitation he told me about it, adding that he would like me to attend with the rest of the family.

"You have two weeks to prepare for it", he said.

"The attire will be strictly formal, coat and tie or anything traditional. If you think you would like a coat from among those that I have upstairs, you are free to choose one. But if you like a new one for yourself, we could go to town one of these days and buy it. We could get somebody to stitch you a nice traditional outfit too."

A week to the day of the party Gertrude came into their room in the afternoon and found me with two of her husband's coats in my hands.

"If I didn't see you searching these pockets," she began at the top of her voice, "nobody will ever know that you are the one who has been stealing money from this house." She called for the servants.

"I am not stealing any money, madam. I was just measuring the coats..." I tried in vain to explain.

"Are you now a tailor? They give you a simple ABC you can't do it, you are there only measuring coats. Put them down before I call a police on you. Thief."

I had never been very enthusiastic about the idea of the party from the day Max mentioned it to me. That incident in the room drove away the little inclination to attend that I ever had. But how could I tell Max what had happened? Would such information not spoil their marriage.

When he asked me two days before the party whether I had decided how I would dress on that day, I said: "I don't know whether I will go."

"If ever there is one party which you have to attend, be it Dennis," he said, "this is the one. It will do more for your future than all the years you will spend here. If you are thinking of ever making a living through art, then, this is a chance for you to meet the people who would pay anything for a painting."

I did not feel convinced by what Max said. And I am sure I thought he might just be coaxing me to attend. The party was due to start at 9 o'clock, and Max had reminded me about it that morning before going to work. I had not openly refused. I had simply said "O.K." When he returned from work that afternoon he sent Belinda to go and call for me so that we could decide what I was going to wear in the evening.

Gertrude had gone to visit a friend in the adjoining compound. When Belinda left Vivian was following. Max went to the balcony at the back to tell her to wait for Vivian so that the two of them would go together. The little girl stood until her sister joined her, then they continued. They were just at the steps into my house when Gertrude called from across the hedge:

"Belinda and Vivian, where are you going?"

"Daddy sent us to call for Uncle Dennis," Belinda said.

"What did I tell you?" Gertrude asked, charging towards them with frightful fury. By the time she reached them the little girl said, trembling:

"You said we should never go to his house."

“Now you turn and go back to the house before I sink my claws into your heads.”

I was peeping through an opening on the window. I saw the children lift their eyes in the direction of the balcony. Their father was looking at them.

They hesitated.

“You just keep moving,” Gertrude barked. I think she had seen Max, but she did not allow what she considered an ugly stare to stop her from controlling the actions of her children.

Max bit his lips. Then he waited until the children had returned to the house before calling Gertrude to enquire about her conduct. He was talking to her over the hedge. I was sure that he was planning to come to me after that.

“Do you realize how cruel it is for you to behave that way?” he asked her.

“A thief must be treated cruelly,” Gertrude said. “That man you call your brother is a thief.”

“It is wrong for you to use such language on my friend.”

“I will not talk of the number of times I have caught him searching pockets in this house.”

She re-entered their compound and hurried to the parlour in their house and brought out Max’s album to the balcony where he stood. I heard her asking aloud:

“There was a picture of your primary school mates here. Where is it now?”

“Where is it, Gertrude?”

“Your friend has stolen it. Ask him.”

“Why?”

“Go and ask him. The children saw him taking it, and when I asked him he refused.”

Max asked Belinda whether it was true and she agreed that she saw me removing it.

“That is why I have banned my children from setting foot in that house,” Gertrude went on.

I felt my anus twitching. I felt like going to stool. But the latrine was outside the building, and I was too ashamed of myself to leave the little house and be seen. It was not that I was guilty of anything the way Gertrude had said it. But I hated to show myself to Dr. Max. I did not want him to know that I had heard all that was being said about me. I did not know how he was going to take what Gertrude had just said, and which the children had confirmed. Would he ask me? He may not. And if he did not, how was he going to know the truth? It would be worse if he believed this and did not ask me.

*

Maximillian Essemo Alekwieunchaa

While I stood listening to Gertrude and Belinda and thinking about my friend, the phone rang. The call was from the hospital. A woman had just been admitted with an acute gynaecological complication that required my help in the operation that was to be carried out on her. I think the good Lord saved me with that intervention because I was to go down to see Dennis from where I stood. I was not quite sure whether he had heard what Gertrude and the child had said. But I had heard, and what I heard did not please me one bit.

It was just after seven when I got back home that evening. The embarrassment in my heart at what I had heard that afternoon had subsided. But the issue was still on my mind and it was important for me to talk it over with Dennis. I did not want to take Gertrude's word for it. Besides, there was this party thing. And it was getting late. And I had not talked to him when I returned in the afternoon. But I spoke to him in the morning though.

I had a quick supper. Mere formality because there was going to be much to eat and drink at the party. I got dressed and I stepped out and looked over the balcony, in the

direction of Dennis' place. I was going to collect him so that we go. No lights. And no signs of anybody coming over to the main building. I could not just stand up there waiting. What was the point standing there and just waiting? I decided to go down there and find out what was happening. Where could Dennis have gone to, I wondered as I descended the stairs. He knew of the party, and that we were to leave at 8.30! Not that I hated the idea of his going anywhere. In fact, I had often encouraged him to go out for a stroll from time to time. But on occasions like the impending party, I expected him to speak to me before leaving. Or could he have fallen asleep.

As I came nearer the house a wave of apprehensions swept over me. My heart began to thump faster and faster and I suddenly began to fear for Dennis' life. He could have gone away to do mischief to himself. The way he behaved, hmm, he could do anything. Or maybe he heard Gertrude and was so ashamed that he fled the compound. But why flee? I was the master of the house. Nothing could happen to him unless I willed it. I was already at his door. I reached for the knob, my fingers trembling feverishly. Hell, I told myself. Tremble in my own compound like that? No way. I turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The door gave way so unexpected that I lost balance and would have fallen into the house had I not clung firmly to the knob which my weight actually damaged. Total darkness everywhere. The outside was even brighter. But I knew where to find the switch. I paused for a whole minute to get acquainted with the darkness, to get my bearing right.

The air was dead still and sultry with silence. I groped to the right, put my finger on the switch. I paused again for one spilt second, and pressed on the light. Then I held my head down for some time to acquaint my eyes with the sudden blinding brightness.

There were ugly sights one witnessed in the medical profession. I mean ugly sights. But when I lifted my head, the sight that met my eyes was easily the very worst, the most disconcerting. Dennis had not gone out. He was not asleep. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his left hand on his left bent knee, his back arched and his head held downward in his right hand. He was naked. I mean stark, starring naked.

He was staring directly at the ground before him. He did not even raise his head to see who had come into the room. I heaved a very long sigh, pulled off my spectacles, ran my hands over my face as though to reopen my eyes and find it all a mere dream.

I then took a chair from the table and sat in front of him. Mark you, he had not made a move ever since I came in and put on the light. He still did not stir when I dragged the chair. I tried to touch him but hesitated. Could he have been electrocuted? I bent and looked him in the lowered face. His eyelids seemed to blink. Yes, they were blinking, copiously. I put my right hand on his left shoulder and pushed him slightly backwards.

"Bo, Dennis!" I called. My voice was almost strangled with fear. I felt a sudden throbbing pain in my belly as if somebody had lit a candle and thrown inside.

"Eh, bo Max," he answered deep in his throat. His voice was feeble and as he spoke he raised his head, his eyes blinking as though he had been struck in the face.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

He did not answer.

"Are you sick?"

"I am not sick."

"You are not sick?"

Indignation had entered my voice. He stretched with a slight jerk, licked his lips as if to speak, raised a brow and then remained silent again.

“What do you mean by all this, Dennis? Tell me. Just what do you really mean?”

“What have I done?”

“What have you not done?”

He looked about him and then pulled a sheet over his thighs. I think he suddenly realized that he was naked. I bit my lower lip for a very long time, fighting to suppress the impulse to insult and drive him out of my house.

“What do you mean by sitting on your bed, alone, naked, in the dark, in that frightful manner on an X-ma Eve like this when the whole world is out rejoicing?”

He said nothing. Then later he said:

“Bo Max, I put out the light because I was not using it. I did not want to waste it. I was not reading, and did not feel like sleeping. So I put out the light.”

I was annoyed and could not conceal it. This was the turning point in our relationship, in my attitude towards him. Previously I had tried to talk to him with great gentleness. Now I was angry.

“Dennis,” I cried. “Is it normal for a human being to behave like this?”

He did not answer. Perhaps he was not a human being at all.

“I have told you that I have money,” I found myself saying for the millionth time. “It is no inconvenience at all if you light the lamp only to sit under it, doing nothing. That is the way people live. In fact, you are not helping me at all by doing that.”

He sat up, then bending his head slightly to the left said rather apologetically.

“I did not say that you do not have money to pay. I only said that I did not want the light.”

“I was not boasting that I have money.” I discerned a note of sarcasm, however unintended, in his silly answer. “Of course you know that it not to people like you that I can boast of wealth.”

He seemed to shudder at the insult. I couldn't care less. "I was only trying to make you see that you only offend me in putting out the light and remaining naked in the dark."

"I made a mistake in saying so," he said with genuine compunction. "What I wanted to say was that I did not want the light. I did not need it."

"And see the way you are sitting. How would you feel if you came into a room in your house and met one of your children sitting in that fashion in the dark? You should think him mad. Not even to raise your head to see who entered."

I knew he would not like the comparison I had drawn between him and a child. But it was necessary. There was nothing else I could compare him to. The only other thing was a mad man or a corpse. He was not far from any of them. And then I heard him talking to himself somewhere down his throat.

"How had I really offended anybody. Was I in the dark even? There was no light in the room, yes. But was I not seeing the world? Was it the room that was dark, or my mind? And Max blamed me for not raising my head to see who had come in. Why raise it? What could happen to me even if I did not know who came in? Who was I afraid of? What had I to protect? Why would a man want to kill me?"

I gave a damn to what he was saying.

"I told you about this party long ago and I reminded you yesterday. Get dressed and come along..."

"I don't like to go," he said.

I persisted:

"You should, Dennis. You have got to understand that the key to success of any kind on this earth is company. The more people you meet and talk to, the more broadened your horizon becomes, and the more likely you are to succeed in any undertaking. Yes, it is by meeting people that you get to understand that things which you have been considering personal calamities, are not so personal, and that the whole world is full of people with such problems.

When I mentioned the party I tried to point out that since you have shown such an interest in painting, and since you do not seem to be getting on very well with the other subjects, I intended to introduce you to people who could buy those works. I have friends who can really be of help to you. Art, I think, is one of those professions whose success does not depend on any secrecy. What is required is publicity."

At the mention of the word "profession" in relations to art, I noticed his face undergo an abrupt and unusually wry contortion. As though forcing their way through deep barriers of unfathomable thought, his lips began to move in an effort to smile. The effort seemed to fail him, making the farcical attempt look perhaps like a slight ripple caused by the dropping of some tiny object on the surface of a dark, silent pond.

"I am not a painter," he said. "I only paint because I cannot stop doing so..."

"Then that is where you belong. That is your province," I said. "You continue to undervalue yourself. Nobody will value you if you believe with such grim conviction that you are of no value."

"O.K. if you like you should take the paintings to the people."

"You are the artist, Dennis. They ought to know that such a man as yourself exists..."

"I do not exist. If they know me they will not buy the drawings."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I am nothing."

"And yet you will not stop wasting your stupid time and money on papers and colours." I rose indignantly and banging the door savagely behind me, went out. I went right up to the main building but returned to him and said:

"And there is this point also, Dennis, which I wanted to find out from you. Do you know who took a picture from the album in the parlour? The picture I showed you in which we were with other members of our standard five class.

He fidgeted with his hands for a long time and then said:
“No.”

I looked at him suspiciously.

“But why should it take you such a long time to say No?

The children claim that they saw you taking it.” I said.

“I did not take it,” he insisted.

I had to leave again.

*

As it always happened whenever I was dealing with Dennis, it did not take long for pity to supplant anger in my mind. And with this came a sudden urge to probe into the depths of the mystery behind his behaviour.

The party was to last till the following morning, but whatever happened that evening I missed. First, the woman I had operated on during the early hours of the afternoon was in a critical condition. They sent for me at 11 pm. and when I went there I thought it was necessary for me to hang around the surgical ward until the situation improved.

The situation did not improve. Actually, the son-of-a-bitch passed away at precisely 2am. The party was still on, just beginning, as I knew it would be from past experience. But I could not see myself dancing and drinking with the news of a dead woman on my mind. No patient had ever been sick enough to die. It is always that the doctor did not try sufficiently to save her life. People would think so, but never say to you or in your presence, that you would have saved. And then, there was this albatross of Dennis on my neck. His own problem was just as serious as death to me.

From the hospital I drove home and phoned the Governor's Lodge to inform my family I could not make it. It was 3.30 when I returned home There was light in Dennis's room. Perhaps it was the light I had put on. And, indeed, it was as I feared. He was still sitting almost in the same position that I had left him.

“I have just received an urgent call down South again, bo Dennis,” I said. “I shall leave here very early in the morning and I will not return until after Christmas. There is a very good chance that I will stop at Mbongo on my return and I should be able to see your family. Do you have a message for your wife?”

He sat quiet for a very long time. I would like to believe that he was thinking about something. Then he said:

“Just greet all of them.”

“You should write a letter. Your wife will be glad to read how you feel.”

Again, Dennis remained thoughtful for some time and then said.:

“No, I won’t write. Just tell them that I am very well.”

“Are you very well, bo Dennis?” I asked.

“I am very well.”

“I honestly wish you could say that with some amount of sincerity,” I said and then bade him goodbye.

*

Something happened that night. When I sat at the party that I was urgently wanted at the hospital to save a life, Gertrude did not believe me. To her thinking I was going to meet another woman, as she always said. I have now come to believe what people always say: that when a woman flirts with men, she is always suspicious of her husband. What woman would I be going to meet at 11pm. instead of enjoying myself at the X-ma Eve party? So, as soon as I left the party she borrowed her friend’s car and found a pretext to go after me. I am sure she followed me to the hospital, and must have waited around for a long time to make sure that I was actually going to be there. I am sure that she made several trips to the hospital to ensure that I was still there. I am also sure that when I left the hospital she saw

me and drove back to the party. I didn't want to think that she had been anywhere else while I was at the hospital. I did not like to think so.

After I had spoken to Dennis about my trip to Mbongo, I thought I could as well go to the party and tell her along with a few other friends. As soon as I left the house I saw a car drive off very fast and then turn into an abandoned route. Only later on was I to learn that it was the Car Gertrude was driving. For, as I drove ahead I saw in the mirror that the car had regained the main road and was coming behind me. I am a fast driver and she needed to be very good to arrive there before me. Back at the party, when I enquired about her the lady who had given her the car said:

"She left soon after you went, doctor."

"How did she go?"

"She used my car. She said she forgot something in the house."

Gertrude returned, in a taxi. I did not ask her where she had gone to. She told the lady who had given her the car that she had slipped into a ditch. The problem was immediately communicated to one of the officers who was serving the guests and he got somebody to drive back to the GRA and pull out the car.

"I am going to the South-West in the morning," I said after all the anxiety about the state of the car had subsided. That was the main reason I had come back there. It was not to spy on her.

"What for?" she asked.

"Something official."

"On Christmas day?"

"Yes."

"When are you returning?"

"Possibly after Boxing Day."

Chapter Fifteen

*

Maximilliam Essemole Alekwieunchaa

I DECIDED to forgo Christmas until I had put my finger on the Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem problem. I left Menako at 8 o'clock in the morning and drove first to Ovenga where I spent the night. Early on Boxing Day I left for Mbongo. My mission this time was to probe Dennis's past from people who knew him. He was certainly not the same person I once knew. Let's say I made the mistake of not finding that out in the first place. But so what? When you set out to help somebody do you go into all that trouble? It is just that this was a peculiar problem. A very rare case. An abnormal one.

*

I took Manda completely by surprise. She was sitting on the veranda, loosening her hair she had plaited for Christmas and looking into a mirror on her lap. She may not have paid sufficient attention to the noise of the vehicle as I drove up the road. It was only when I was very near the house that she lifted her head and looked in the direction of the noise. Yes, it was my blue Mercedes, plodding its way up the deserted road.

"Doctor Essemole!" she cried and jumped out of the veranda.

There was a bottle of Vaseline beside her and as she ran out the mirror fell on it and broke into pieces. She did not stop to examine the damage but ran to the edge of the compound and stood dancing with excitement until the car pulled up directly in front of her. Then as I stepped out she fell on me:

“Doctor, welcome. Welcome, doctor. Doctor, where is your friend? How is he, doctor?”

“Really fine.”

She released her hands from the embrace, peeped into the car as if expecting to find her husband. She withdrew her head and, standing back in slight disappointment asked again:

“Please, doctor, tell me, how is your friend?”

“I say good, madam. He is well.”

“Well, doctor?” she pressed on incredulously.

“Come to the house, doctor,” she entreated me. “Don’t let us talk outside as if you are a stranger here. This is your house.”

We went up to the veranda and then she said:

“No, doctor, I beg you, wait. Wait here. I did not know you were coming. I have not touched a broom since yesterday.”

She ran about confusedly, apologies issuing from every gasp.

“No, madam, it’s o.k. for me,” I said calmly and entered the house, trying very unsuccessfully to restrain her from worrying too much on my account.

She pulled out a chair, bent to clean it with a sheet taken from the room. Perspiration poured like rain from her face on to it. She pushed it aside and pulled another which she wiped furtively with the lower edge of her gown and threw the white sheet over it.

“Doctor, I beg you please, sit here.”

I thanked her but removed the sheet and before she had time to protest I sat down on the bare surface.

"It cannot dirty my trousers, Madam, Don't you see that it is also brown? Besides, the chair is clean enough."

Manda smiled and clapped her hands in surprise. She then sat down too and asked again:

"Doctor, you say how is your friend?"

"Very well indeed. He sends a lot of greetings to you all. Where are the children?"

"These devils, they never stay at home, doctor. They are outside. Let me go and look for them, doctor."

She rushed out of the house and began shouting their names across the backyard until one of them answered. She insulted his father's mother before asking him to look for the other and hurry home with him.

"They are coming doctor."

"Your husband sends this to you and the children." Manda stretched both hands politely, even going on her knees before the envelope touched her palms. Then she opened it carefully and, discovering the contents, cried:

"Money, doctor? My husband has sent us 10,000 francs, doctor? Say you have given us doctor. Where does he get his own money from when he does not do anything?"

She folded the money and putting it into her brassiere said:

"God bless you doctor." As an afterthought she asked:

"And he has not written any letter, doctor?"

"He says he is very busy now with his work. You know the exams will soon come..."

"Doctor, how is he doing?"

I paused. I had to weigh my words with absolute care before talking.

"He is trying. I must say."

"Doctor, I thought you will just say he will pass. This one that you say he is trying, like this, I fear..."

"You don't need to fear, madam," I tried to calm her.

"With God on our side, we shall succeed."

“God, doctor? You know that you are our own God. We have no other God except you. If you cannot give him what he needs, no other God can do anything. Do you really say he is trying doctor?”

I nodded. I was their God, and I had failed them. There was no other God for them, except me. And yet, I may not save my friend, I hated to think. But why was she so worried? Why was she so concerned with his well-being?

“But he is my husband na, doctor. And I have been having some kind of dreams that make me want to come to Menako only to see him and go me back. But only that your friend, doctor, the way he does his things, I don’t know me...”

“Like what, madam?”

“Look at my small child here, he needs a follower, doctor. Why do you and your friend say we should not have another child?”

“Who said that?”

“But your friend wrote to me saying that.”

“He said I said so?”

“Yes, doctor. I wrote to him to ask him about it, and he said you advised him to wait until he had finished his exams.”

That was not true. I never discussed any such thing with Dennis. I had tried to convince Dennis to invite her to come to Menako. I did mention the idea of having another child, but Dennis himself did not want his wife to come there. That was not the best moment to discuss that. I told her:

“Madam, when I go back my friend and myself shall discuss that again.”

“Does that your place like him, doctor?”

“It sure does madam. Only I don’t know whether he really likes it.”

“How do you mean, doctor?”

The truth of my visit would not be long in being discovered.

“Well I mean because he does not like to enjoy himself at all...”

“Doctor,” she cut in, “if you are looking for your friend to enjoy himself, you will never see it.”

“He doesn’t?”

She shook her head.

“It means that when he was here he did not attend games?”

“None, doctor.”

“Cinema?”

“No, doctor.”

“Parties, and things of the sort?”

She shook her head in rejection.

“Why?” I asked.

“You mean why, how, doctor?”

Actually it was a dumb question.

“Since when? I wanted to say since when. He was very active when we were in school...”

“Even when we married, doctor, he was very active. He used to play all the games.”

“Then what happened?”

“Doctor, it is people like you who can tell us. I don’t know, whether it is that his prison, I don’t know.”

“Prison? Dennis has been to prison?” I could not believe it.

That may be the answer. That may explain a lot of things.

“Your friend has been to prison,” she said. “Your friend has been to prison.”

“When was that? You know I have been out of the country for years and years. I had been out of touch with him too for years.”

“Your friends has been to prison,” she said to herself. “Five years today. We have even forgotten all about it.”

She sat down and narrated what she knew about the cause of the imprisonment, and when he was released.

“After that,” she said sadly, “Dennis was not the same man that I married. I think the prison just killed him. He always said that people who go to prison are thieves. And he went to prison without stealing anybody’s piece of paper.”

“And he is not the same man I was thinking about when I wrote to ask him to come.”

She looked at me for some time and then asked:

“Doctor, this information that I have given you, is it bad?”

“You mean bad in what way, madam?”

“I mean whether, as you have heard that he has been to prison you will send him back when he has not yet...”

“How can I do that? It is even a very positive thing to know this. It only helps me to mean what I say. It is good because it helps me to understand him a lot more, and to be able to help him better. If I knew all this we would not be having the sort of problems that we have been having.”

“You have been having problems with him, doctor?”

“Well, not problems in that sense. I mean that it would have been easier for me to draw a programme for him. For instance, I am just learning that he really wanted to be an artist, that art occupies an important place in his life.”

“Wwuhh!” she exclaimed. “Drawing is his die. Is he still drawing there, doctor?”

I did not answer at once because I did not know whether to say yes would hurt her.

“Well, sometimes, he scratches things on pieces of paper.”

“Doctor, tell him to stop it. Let him do the kind of thing that you want him to do.”

“But we should at least let him succeed in what he likes. If it is drawing, no problem.”

“He cannot succeed in drawing, doctor,” she said. “If I show you the things he started painting years and years ago, you will be surprised. Only painting. Only painting, only painting. He will not sell anything, and he will not stop painting. If he was to succeed in drawing then all these drawings should have helped him.”

Manda did not know that she had solved most of the mystery for me. Dennis loved art, and must be helped to achieve success in that field.

“Another thing too is writing, doctor. Has he ever shown you the things he is always writing?”

“No. I didn’t know about writing.”

“Writing and drawing are food for him. He will be sleeping in the night, then suddenly he will get up and begin to write things. And when I ask him what he will do with the things he has been writing, he would say: “wait and see.”

Chapter Sixteen

*

Maximillian Essemole Alekwieunchaa

I LEFT Mbongo with a hitherto unthought-of idea for the future of Dennis. If Dennis was ever to value himself, I thought, he must be made to rebuild what had been destroyed in him. The solution did not lie in making him a doctor, not any more. It lay in making him win a prestigious scholarship to do art in the United States. But first, I thought it was necessary to be sure of the facts of the story. I thought I must check first with prison records from Komen-dor. Then I was also to check with the American Cultural Centre in Ovenga.

I took along with me three large paintings which Manda pulled out from under the bed. I didn't think it important to tell her what my plans were. I simply said:

"There might be a change in his programme, madam. But whatever that is, you can be sure that it will be for his own good and for the good of you all. I am determined to make him succeed."

*

Before I finally left Mbongo I was able to get confirmation by phone from Komen-dor that Dennis had, in fact, been imprisoned. I returned through Ovenga where I hoped to discuss the problem with the authorities in the American Cultural Centre.

There I booked a personal interview with the Public Relations Officer, Elkon Moore, to whom I very carefully explained my reasons for coming:

"I have a good friend of mine living with me, an artist. We were once mates in the primary school but now he is a thoroughly frustrated man. I have tried to encourage him to do some reading subjects, but it looks like he is only interested in drawing."

"Where do we come in, Dr. Essemo?"

I told him:

"He once mounted an Art Exposition here, some six or seven years ago, and I was wondering if he could mount another one..."

"Of course, that is why we are here. We are here to tap local talents and bring them to the limelight. For better or for worse. Did you say six years ago?"

Elkon Moore's tone made me enquire whether he had been there for long.

"Eleven years. What is his name? We have a record of all the Expositions mounted here. And I retain the names of the best artists. At least some of them. The best of the best."

He smiled.

"Dennis Nunqam is his name," I said.

Elkon Moore sat still for a while and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his forehead. Then he repeated:

"D-e-n-n-i-s!"

It was a name he had once known very well.

"I know him, a tallish, cheerful young artist, right?"

"Yes, yes," I said. "He used to be very cheerful. The Exposition took place in July, 1964.

"I remember it so well. It was the first of its kind. We made all efforts to contact him after that but it was not possible. The public just loved his work, he was the idol of tourists. Very original in a familiar way. Is he still painting?"

“He is, but he had become a very bitter man. If you wouldn’t mind I would bring one of his recent works for you to see. I have it up in my car.”

“I would love to see it,” the man said.

I went out and within a few minutes I was back with two large paintings. Elkon Moore set them against the wall, changed his spectacles and then stood back to admire them.

“Just as I expected,” he commented, nodding and moving first forward then backwards, studying the paintings. “I ain’t no connoisseur of art, buddy, but the moment I saw this young man’s work that July I knew he was no amateur. Do you see the direction in which his work has moved?”

He changed the position of the paintings, changed the spectacles again and then after looking at the tableau for about three minutes he said:

“I happen to have taken some art courses at the University in the U.S, so I fully get his message. Plus, I’ve worked with many artists here. This is not meaningless jumble of colour and confused strokes as most people tended to describe it the first time he hung one of such paintings up. Do you recognize some reason, some rationale behind it all?”

I remained silent. I did not want to say *yes*, and I did not want to look too ignorant. How then would I explain my bringing the paintings there myself? The most important thing was that the paintings were making a serious impression on Elkon Moore. That was something to capitalize on. After a few seconds I began to nod, imitating Elkon Moore, I had to show a lively interest in what he was enjoying.

“This kind of art has no top, it has no bottom. No such thing as the right side. It is the shape of your wall that determines which will be the bottom. Whichever way you look at it, the message still emerges in one way or the other – a supernatural expression which splits open the subconscious mind to the observer. Look at it from this angle.”

He turned it upside down.

I nodded several times.

"The figure of the little girl disappears. What looked like a red dress becomes almost a series of flames, or a red rose. See how much lust he expresses in that blend of red. And those strokes, see the terror he expressed in their sharpness. Look at the blacks and blues and how they surround the image in the centre. If you are thinking of an expression of sorrow or isolation in a painting, there it is."

"You are right," I concurred. Elkon Moore turned the second painting too upside down.

"This is too good and too consistent to be an accident. There is a certain flair, a certain genius, an inborn virtuosity in his sense of balance. See, look at the blue and the black how they meet in the centre and shake hands colours shaking hands?" he asked.

"Of course, there they are," I said, also laughing, for my friend's sake, because the painting made no sense to me, absolutely no sense. Not to say nonsense.

"You discover something new each time you go back to it," Elkon Moore continued.

I nodded.

"What else is art?"

"Nothing," I said but without exultation.

"We should still have a videotape of his vernissage downstairs. You want to come with me to look at it?"

Are you kidding? I was more than willing. The two of us left and descended into the auditorium in the basement area. Elkon Moore looked for it himself and then asked his technician to play it for us.

The man I saw on the screen that afternoon was the Dennis Nunqam I once knew, the one I had in mind when I set out to cure him of his misery and lowliness, the one I was thinking about when I said Medicine was the profession of professions.

Cheerful, talkative, witty, and bubbling with confidence and good health, Dennis was talking art to an audience of over fifty respectable men and women. At one point he was answering to the question:

“Why do you not draw actual recognizable objects and people like other artists do?”

“I was born weak,” Dennis said. “So I fear to provoke a quarrel with photographers by doing what they should be doing. They take photographs of what they see, I draw what I think I am seeing. Sometimes, what I draw is not even what I am seeing, but what I think an object or a person looks like when I am not looking at it”.

Everybody burst out laughing. Elkon Moore too laughed, but not me. Even with the knowledge of the imprisonment, I still could not understand what could have happened to the Dennis I was seeing on the screen now, to have permanently wiped off that broad and fascinating smile from his face. I could not understand what had happened to so totally destroy the zest for living in him.

“What future do we still have for such a man as this?” I asked Elkon Moore.

“If he is still keen on painting, then there is very much he can achieve. After all the public is becoming much more enlightened than it was the first time I met him. I remember he even had a scholarship problem.”

“I have just learned about that too. It looks like it was that which completely shattered his sense of worth. What exactly happened, if I may ask?”

“Dr. Essemö, I don’t think I am in a position to tell you exactly what happened. What I do know, however, is that he was to have had an A.A.I. Scholarship but his government thought there was some more worthy candidate.”

“It was really bad,” I said.

“I know. But there have been numerous cases of the sort here”.

“Do such possibilities still exist? Do opportunities still come up for scholarships to do art?” I pressed to know.

“They always exist, but this is something which is done at the governmental level. We always have one or two scholarships each year, and for the past couple of years, much emphasis has been placed on cultural activities. But as I said, your government nominates those who are to be awarded, and from my experience here it looks like candidates are more likely to win scholarships when they know people of your status.”

Chapter Seventeen

*

Dr. William Eshuonti

MAX SPOKE to me at the party on this his trip to Mbongo. If you ask me I would swear that I thought he was joking that he was actually going to Mbongo for that reason. In any case we had a hell of a time, Max or no Max. He did me the honour of coming to see me and not phone to me on the results of his findings.

I was in my office when he knocked and came in. I was sitting behind my large writing desk of polished mahogany, going through files. I was leaning slightly on my left hand which clenched a large cancer, thinking things over.

“Welcome back”, I greeted Max and showed him a chair on the other side of the table. Max had not even sat down when he announced his eureka:

“I have just discovered the root cause of the problem.”

I believe in living and working in comfort. My office was very impressively furnished. By my standards, of course, which were not low at all by any standards. To the far left of the room stood three very comfortable armchairs round a low central table with a rotating device underneath. Each of the armchairs had a side stool. Behind the armchairs, and directly under a large window stood a fridge that was constantly supplied with drinks of all sorts.

When Max spoke I knew what he was talking about. But I believe in ceremony, sometimes, some sort of ceremony. If he had gone right to Mbongo to find out about Dennis,

then it was no longer a joke, and I was determined not to treat it with levity. I left my seat, taking my packet of cancer with me and went to the window. It was wide open but the blinds cut off much of the light that would have come in. I pushed the blinds towards the hinges on either side and then pointed to the three chairs.

“Why don’t we sit there.”

I wanted him to be comfortable because I meant to talk to him seriously about his friend. Max rose and went and sat on one of the chairs. I went and settled myself in another armchair next to him, deliberately assuming a coldly impersonal attitude.

“So what have you discovered?”

“Dennis had been to prison. That is what has been eating him up so badly.”

That was nothing to make me feel elated. Perhaps my friend thought I would stand up and shake his hand. I pulled the cigar from my mouth and said rather casually.

“I thought you were going to say you have just discovered that Dennis escaped from a mental hospital.”

“Why did you expect me to say so?”

“It is what I would have liked to hear. What you have just said, or rather what you have just discovered does not seem to me to bring us any nearer the solution” I hated to make a man feel bad after what he considered an achievement, but I have this weakness to be very blunt towards people I love. I hate to flatter people.

“How do you mean?” Max asked me.

“Because I still cannot tie his conduct up with being an ex-convict. I don’t think that is how ex-convicts behave. People have left prison and led better lives than that. How long did he remain in prison?”

He told me.

“How do you intend to solve him then? Convince him that he had actually never been to prison or what?”

"Of course not."

"Then what?"

Max told me his plan.

"Have you asked him whether he wants to be an artist or not?" I asked him. "Have you asked him whether to go to America was his main goal in life or not?"

"Willie, if you understood the circumstance under which he went to prison and how he has been behaving since then, you should not need to be told that it is certainly the one thing which will restore that crushed ego of his."

I rose abruptly and went to the fridge and pulled it open.

"Beer or what?"

Max ran his hand over his face briskly and said:

"Gin Campari. With some ice."

I closed the fridge, took out what he wanted from the cupboard and I brought the drinks to the table and allowed Max to serve himself. I took beer myself.

"Post Mortem," I said.

Under normal circumstances, Max would have completed the saying. He merely lifted his glass.

"Nulla voluptas," I said myself. We raised the glasses in the air and clicked them. I allowed Max to take a sip and then I told him:

"Max, you are applying logic or science where you needed only common sense. Ordinary common sense."

Max placed his glass back on the table and stared at me. I could read much incomprehension in his eyes. I continued:

"I guess I should say something on this matter for once, bo. Ever since you brought this gentleman here, I have been reluctant to make any suggestion and insist too strongly on it. For some reason which I shall never understand, you seem to be taking the rehabilitation of this Dennis as a sort of challenge. And since we don't rival each other in anything, I decided to stay out of it. When you returned from Geneva I told you categorically, and without mixing words, that the

greatest service you can render both yourself and this gentleman was to send him back to where you had gone and brought him from. You must have thought me insane.

"And not only did you not send him back but you decided to teach him yourself. I had nothing to say because you did not ask for my advice. But if you had asked me I would have told you that the better of the evils would have been to leave him in my institution." "Why?"

"Because you are a doctor, not a teacher. And this problem was not that of doctor of medicine."

I could see Max smiling contemptuously. I was not surprised. He picked up his glass again and as he was sipping it he was looking at me. I went on:

"Now, look at this elaborate art programme you say you have carved out for him. Your idea of art seems to be different from mine and even different from what art really is. To do art at the university level does not just entail drawing and painting 24 hours a day for four years. So if you are thinking of making him return to this country with a degree in art, you should know that he will have to take courses outside the department of Art.

"And I don't see Mr. Dennis behaving differently from what I have noticed for the past months, when confronted with some challenging academic work. The Americans do not behave like us. They are not as sympathetic as we are. They have a system and all human beings are rigidly classified. If you don't fit somewhere, they know or find where to fit you. If your Dennis goes there and behaves the way he is behaving here, he will be taken straight from the dormitories into a mental hospital."

I could see that Max was offended. But why get offended?

"Seriously," I said.

"You are looking at the situation from a most oblique angle..." Max said.

"Perhaps you will soon find that it is the only angle from which to look at it..."

"I was still talking, Willie," Max hit his glass hard on the table and pushed it towards me as if to suggest that they wouldn't drink anymore because he had been insulted. All I could do was shake my head in sympathy. He spoke on:

"What you miss, Willie, is the main reason why he became so terribly depressed..."

"Which is?"

"He was denied the opportunity to go out of the country."

"You said that was five years ago. You think that should still be his only problem to date? You talk of his going to America, do you intend to send his entire family there? Little things like that must be taken into account."

"I don't need to. They will remain behind. They will be very well cared for."

"On whose terms shall they be remaining behind?"

"On mine, which is the same as saying on his terms too."

I held my cigar with my thumb and second finger and then pointed emphatically at Max.

"There, precisely, is the real problem or the real cause of one of them. You have to understand the problem you are tackling first. You have to understand that if Dennis is a patient as you have often described him, he is a very different kind of patient from the ones you are used to. Sometimes a woman is brought to you pregnant, and you find that the position of the baby is such that for her to survive she has to be operated upon. She has no choice and has to obey you and live or refuse and die. Whatever way you look at it Dennis is certainly not that kind of a patient, at least from my own limited point of view. You brought him here to educate him, and education is the one field in which you cannot apply the rule of thumb in all circumstances. Each individual must be treated as a brand new problem, a unique case..."

"If I did not regard Dennis as a unique case I wouldn't have brought him here."

“Well, you may be right. But you must understand now or never, that you are dealing with a man who does not even know what is wrong with himself, a man who knows that even you the doctor, you do not know what is wrong with him and can never know, a man who will therefore not willingly allow you to give him medicine for a disease he knows you are certainly ignorant of. You’ve got to admit this as the main problems, Max, otherwise you will only be creating more problem for you and everybody.”

Max lit a cigarette and began to smoke. In dropping off the ashes they accidentally fell into his glass instead of the ashtray. I pushed the glass aside and rose to go for another.

“That’s o.k. with me,” he said.

“No more?”

“No.”

In his belief I was wrong. He was convinced that he, Max, thoroughly understood the problem and was competent of solving it. But he asked me further.

“So, if you were asked to resolve such a matter what would you do?”

“I would NEVER have created the problem,” I said. “You get no credit from creating a problem and then solving it yourself. You get credit if you encounter an unexpected problem and then you solve it neatly...”

“An unexpected problem like this one?”

“This is not an unexpected problem. You created it yourself. But Why? It is even worse if you create a problem and fail to solve it. You should never have gone to look for him. Before you went for him there was no problem. His situation in life might not have looked like a problem to him. Now there are several. Even if by some miracle you solve it, you will never get any credit from me.”

“I don’t even need a miracle to solve it, and I don’t need credit from you or anybody else. God is my witness. I went for him not because I wanted credit for helping him but because I felt obliged to pay him back for being so...”

"You have said that too many times before, Max. The point is that a man of your status cannot spend his life paying back debts which people do not even remember owing you."

"That is what is meant by gratitude," Max said priggishly.

But I thought differently. I told him:

"I call it ingratitude. And I call it so because your determination to force the reward down his throat shows that you are uncomfortable to live in his debt."

"That comment sounds cruel to me, Willie. I did not expect you to reason so absurdly"

"Well, what can I say? You came to ask for my views and..."

"I did not come to ask for your views. I came to tell you." Max had already risen to go out. I asked him to sit down and then I told him:

"The way you have approached this issues is precisely the problem that faces in your job..."

"I have no problem with my job, Willie."

"Because you are the boss, right?"

"Your own lips have said it," he said with an air of unchallengeable superiority.

"Never think you have no problem until you have heard what your workers say behind your back. Many of them think you are too dictatorial, that you never suggest, you only tell, just as you came to TELL me."

Max smiled and said.:

"Nobody with a head will ever think bad of me, Willie. Besides, if you bother about what your workers would say behind your back, you will never do the right thing in front of them."

Chapter Eighteen

*

Maximillian Essemo Aleukwieunchaa

THERE WAS no human force on this planet to make me flinch from my conviction. I was not wrong in the strategy I had developed for Dennis. Willie was talking from a distance. He did not feel the problem the way I felt it. He was talking from a defeatist standpoint. He thought the problem was unsolvable. I had never considered any problem as unsolvable. There was no reason why I should now begin to think that way. As I drove away from his office I was determined to prove to him in no distant future that it was well within my reach to redeem Dennis and make Willie the laughing stock.

*

Dennis was at home when I returned. It was one of those unguarded moments when he was drawing. I came to realize he always took exquisite care not to be drawing at an hour when he thought I could visit him. I was pretty sure that he only stopped drawing when he heard my footsteps outside his door, because when I entered he was trying to fold up a large sheet of paper in front of him.

“I had read a lot and was feeling tired, that is why I took up this...” he began explaining like a child caught doing the wrong thing. He did not know that my plans had changed, and that art was the one thing I would like to see him do.

“Bo Dennis,” I said. “Feel perfectly free to do just what you think best and enjoyable for you. All roads lead to Rome.”

I went and picked up the sheet of paper which Dennis had finished folding and had thrown under the table and stretched it out wide on the table.

“I really like your work, bo Dennis,” I remarked. “What is this really? I don’t quite understand it.” Although the compliment was insincere, the confession wasn’t. I did not understand it. “But I can see a man’s hand, an eye, a palm tree...”

“It is nothing,” he said. “I just wanted to send sleep and tiredness out of my eyes. I had been reading biology and ...”

“No, I am not bothered by the fact that you were not reading. I am merely talking about the picture. It is really brilliant. Just that I cannot understand it. I thought you might have some clue to the interpretation.”

“It is meaningless,” Dennis said.

I sat down and looked at him. He was wearing one of the shirts I had bought for him, under his jumpa. He also wore a khaki pair of shorts which was undoubtedly a pair of trousers which had been trimmed at the knees. I had not seen him with it before. His feet were bare and he had been sitting with his back to the door when I entered. When I began to talk to him he swung his chair round and faced me, giving his back to his bed. As I was talking my eyes inevitably looked beyond him and fell on the bed.

It was a study in disgust! Very close to the upper edge and, lying disorderly near the pillow, were two pants, some of those that had been bought for him on his arrival. They had been bought white, but it was hard to tell what colour they now were because from where I stood I could actually see a broad line of dirt, probably after-shit excrement running down the centre of each. There was no indication whatsoever that any attempt had been made to wash them for weeks, or even months.

Did Dennis not know that those pants were dirty, I wondered. Was the pillow the best place for them? If he had no time to wash them, could he not have the common sense of keeping them out of sight? Did it even occur to him that I, Max, had seen them and that I was certainly not impressed by the sight. Did it even occur to him that I, Max, had seen them and that I was certainly not impressed by the sight? Only my years of experience as a doctor prevented me from throwing up.

I thought of the challenge Willie had thrown to me, or rather the challenge I had taken on myself. I thought I should immediately release the information which was to lead to the final solution of whatever had been responsible for his consistently absurd behaviour.

"I told you I might touch Mbongo. I actually went there and met your wife and children. They were all very well."

"I see," Dennis said without emotion.

"They all sent greetings."

"I see."

"Your wife, in fact, expressed the desire to see you again soon. So I guess that one of these days if I am to go down South again we would go together so that you spend a weekend with them."

"Bo, I have said that I cannot go to Mbongo again like this," Dennis said. "I don't know why but every time I hear you call it, every time I think of it I-I-I- am afraid."

I suspected that perhaps Dennis thought I just wanted to trick him and take him back there and abandon him.

"No problem. If the mountain cannot go to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain. Did you ever hear of that?"

Dennis nodded. He had indeed heard it several times but just now he made it look as if I was using it to insult him.

"In that case you should have her come, Dennis,"

“Let her come.” Dennis spoke as though he had no control over her or over anybody else.

“Then you must write to her to ask her to come.”

“Let her come at any time she wants. Let her come at any time you want.”

“You talk as if you just don’t care whether she comes here or not, Dennis.”

“I said I didn’t want her to come now, bo Max, but you said she must come. So I said she can...”

“I didn’t say she *must* come, Dennis. Don’t make me sound like a dictator in your affairs. I simply said she wants to come. If you don’t want her to come, it’s entirely your own affair.”

Dennis threw a glance at me in which I read a legion of accusations. But he said nothing more.

“However, we have to leave that for some other time. For now, I have something to say which I know you would like very much. And once again, I have to be perfectly open with you. When I came and got you from Mbongo I thought you were the same person that I once knew.”

Dennis bit his lower lip and stared at me and without waiting for me to finish what I was saying he begged:

“I am very sorry, bo Max. I had been to prison but I could not tell you so.”

“That is not the point I am making, Dennis. Well, I was surprised to learn that myself. But that is not my worry. It should not affect our relationship or our plans. After all there are millions of great men, world leaders who had been prisoners. Nkrumah left prison and became the Prime Minister of Gold Coast, which became Ghana. So did Jomo Kenyatta, and a host of famous Russian writer, was a prisoner before he even began to write. Now he is number one in Russian Literature. And if you consider that Russia is the number one power in the world, that should give you an idea of his greatness. Consult the jail records even within

our own country here. There are hundreds of top civil servants who had gone to prison, but that does not stop them from becoming great. All you need to clear the stain is a Certificate of Non-Conviction. And that is something I can obtain for you under ten minutes. The point of having been to prison is therefore not serious as far as I am concerned."

"How will the Certificate of Non-conviction help me, Max?"

"It is simply to tell anybody looking at your dossiers that you had never been to prison."

"And nobody will want to find out?"

"Nobody. To have given you the documents is sufficient indication that you have never been to prison."

Dennis changed the position of his legs and heaved a very heavy sigh. He looked relieved and tried to show it through a faint smile, but incredulity, fear and something which I concluded to be shame, held the muscles of his face taut.

"What I was saying was that before I went for you I thought you were still as composed as you used to be and that you could still pursue academic work of some intensity. Now I have changed my mind. I have changed my mind about your becoming a doctor or anything of the sort because I see that the requirements are too exacting for a man like you who has not been reading science subjects for over ten years.

"But there is good news. Very good news. You will recall that I have often made mention of your drawings, that you should keep them up. You remember how we nearly fought each other the other day because you would not attend the party which would have established some major contacts for you."

Here I laughed and Dennis too joined with a quiet chuckle.

"That was because I believed that we already had something to hang on to," I continued. "In case other plans failed as I think they have."

"Have they failed, bo Max?"

"They have," I said stiffly. "Or you think they have not? Do you still believe you would honestly and easily do medicine? Do you feel emotionally strong enough to afford the amount of concentration that the preparation requires?" "Well, I thought that if, if, I, I, I... Well, perhaps."

"In any case, even if you still feel you can do that, I have decided to change the plans."

"So what will I do now?"

"Art. Since you already spend so much time doing it, I feel it is really what you should in the first place have chosen to do. Your wife told me all about your paintings and to let you know how serious I am, I even brought up some of the paintings you left behind. And by the way, do you know a certain Elkon Moore?"

A surprising quiet fell as though we had both heard a gun-short in a normally peaceful environment. The little rays of life and hope that had begun to creep over Dennis' face evaporated instantly and I could even hear his heart thump above the ticking of my watch.

Dennis ground his teeth and sat up.

"Elkon Moore!" he said down his throat. His whole body seemed to undergo a feeling akin to the sudden recollection of a hideous dream.

"I know him, bo Max" he answered. And with those five syllables which seemed to drop from his lip with ghastly reluctance he held down his head.

When I asked him what bothered him so much in the name I had just called, he spoke with the frankness that indicated to me that I was finally on track. He said it immediately reminded him not to forget how his contact with that same man had reduced him to the wreckage that he had become. He didn't want to hear any more about the

man who made him dream the dream of others, the man who made him mistake a mirage for an oasis in that desert of his life.

"I spent a whole afternoon with him in Ovenga," I resumed. "And you can be sure that the mirage will now become a real oasis," I guaranteed him. "He told me that you had once mounted an unbeatable Art Exposition at the American Embassy there in Ovenga. In fact, he made a suggestion which I found to be the answer to all our doubts."

Dennis clasped his hands tight between his laps and bent with wrapped attention towards me.

"I am listening, bo Max," he said almost inaudibly.

"He is of the opinion that you should mount another Exposition there. And I share the view."

In a shattering contradiction to what I had anticipated, Dennis tightened his lips defiantly, unsmilingly, unexcitedly and was even evidently irritated.

"I think that the paintings which you have here can make a good collection if we carefully frame them for another Exposition." I hastened to finish what I had to say. From my talk with him, I gathered that the only reason why you lost the chance to go to the U.S. was that you knew nobody in a power position. You know that in this country you need a Godfather. Of course you know too well how my father was able to send me abroad.

"From the Art Exposition we will again mobilize public opinion in your favour. But this time it will be done from a position of strength. And if you meet a basic requirement which will be made easy enough for you, you will be in America by this time next year.

"The basic requirement is at least two subjects at the G.C.E. O Level. I understand that you could make Art one of those subjects. English or History could be the other. I don't suppose you could fail to make even a grade 'A' in Art at the Advanced Level. So there we are sure that we are not asking for the impossible. In addition, you will be required

to take the TOEFL exam. There too there is no absolute grade. Nobody ever fails it. Whatever grade you make we shall be able to find a school that will accept it. And should you by some miracle fail to pass the exams, I shall have made the necessary contacts in Europe where you could be selling your paintings.”

Dennis did not raise his head. He would say years later that he thought he was dreaming. That he saw a balloon of gold which I had inflated rise before his mind’s eye. That he saw himself put into the balloon and allowed to fly, to the admiration and wonder of the whole world, nobody knowing who or what was inside. That he then saw the balloon burst suddenly in mid-air. That he saw the truth out of it - Dennis Nunqam, rags, excrement, shame, death. That he saw the world steal away from what it had worshipped just a minute before.

“Let me ask you one thing, bo Max,” he said.

“At your service,” I said.

“What will happen if you are not there?”

“By which you mean what will happen if I died?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take care of that. After you have already established the necessary contacts, after you have had your scholarship and gone, nobody will need my presence any more. My absence will have no effect on your progress.”

“And my family, how will my wife and children be living?”

“They will live in the same way as they are living now. Besides, Dennis, when you are making any serious plans in life, don’t let the consciousness of death disturb you because you have almost no control over it.”

When alone I thought Dennis somewhat selfish. Why would he consider his success as more important than my life? If I died, should that not bother him more than the fact that I was not there to carry out my plans for him?

Chapter Nineteen

*

Maximillian Essemole Alekwieunchaa

DENNIS EVENTUALLY submitted to my decision that he should concentrate on his art and two other subjects at the G.C.E. Ordinary level. That was the good news. He was to take History and English Language for which new teachers were sought from a college in town and no longer from the University. I must admit that the Nunqam crisis built a small wall between the two of us, Willie and myself. A small a wall, but a wall all the same. Such that when I withdrew Dennis from his Institute, he did not ask me about it. He was no longer anxious to know anything about Dennis. But I was happy with my efforts because I was making definite progress. Against all odds!

The registration fee for the June Series of the 1971 London G.C.E. Examination was sent by money order to the British Council in Ovenga at the end of January 1971. That same month I obtained a Certificate of Non-Conviction for him from the police. But this document did not please Dennis. The thought could not be eradicated from his mind that he was just deceiving himself, that he had actually been to prison, and that one day the truth would be known and he would be caught and imprisoned again.

To prepare for this phantom second arrest he therefore decided to let as many people as possible know the real truth. He spoke to the workers about it, he spoke to

Gertrude and even to the people who were asked to teach him. He came to discover that each time he told somebody he felt relieved.

*

Upon receipt of the registration fee the British Council was supposed to acknowledge it in writing. They were supposed to send the Examination Time-Table as well as the acceptance slip to the candidate early in April.

By the end of April I had still not heard anything from them. Since this was getting very close to the date of the examination I decided to go down to Ovenga myself and know the reasons for the delay.

It wasn't that Dennis was really fully prepared for the examination. I had the feeling that he no longer painted with the same ardour that he did before it was made a subject of study. He did his assignments in History and English, although his teachers were not usually very impressed.

But there was some ray of hope. The teachers told me that, depending on how hard or how easy the examination questions turned out to be, there was a possibility that Dennis could "Scrape a Pass." And that was all I asked for.

*

I went to Ovenga in the first week of May, May 4th, to be precise. For two hours the British Council authorities checked and rechecked their files on G.C.E. Registrations. There was no information on Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem. Nothing had been received in his name.

"It is becoming a habit here," the lady in charge said. "Every season a good number of entries never reach us. The Post Office employees are becoming more and more unscrupulous. I think the government should do something about it."

“You must be the twentieth person to complain this season...”

Mine was a special case, I told myself. They said they had long alerted the police about it, but to no avail. The police, they said, were not anxious to pursue the matter unless they were bribed. They even said the police was accusing the British Council of staining the reputation of the Post office, a very respectable institution. I was in no mood to make a case out of the complaint.

I had received news in my past life which I thought bad. This one beat them all. It seemed to shatter and crush me. Although I had kept it all to myself, I had done the impossible, to the extent that it was just enough for Dennis to show up for that exam, and he would make it. That was all lost now.

I had no other choice but to register Dennis again. Not for June, because it was already too late. I registered him for the next season, January 1972. That was easy to do. What was not easy to do was the transferring of the burden from my heart to that of Dennis. Even worse, to that of his wife.

I decided that I would go to Mbongo and acquaint Manda of the change and to discuss any other possibilities which they might want to consider.

*

Of all the journeys that I had made to Mbongo this was the most dispiriting. It was hard for me to imagine how Manda would take the news of the change of date and any suggestions I would have to make. It was even harder to imagine how Dennis would take the disappointment.

I arrived Mbongo so late that I thought it wise not to alarm Manda by waking her up in the night. I slept at the Rest House. For fear of coming when Manda must have gone to the farm, I left very early for Sabongari. I got there

at 6 o'clock in the morning. Manda was still in bed when my car drove up to the yard and stopped. I knocked at the door.

For the first time she regarded me with fear and perplexity. As if by telepathy, her face crumbled before she heard what I had come to say.

She embraced me but the embrace was cold and she did it in a manner which indicated that it was just because she had been used to receiving me that way. It was very unspontaneous. I too held her for a brief moment and then released my grip. I tried to pretend that there was nothing unusual about my visit but it wouldn't work. As soon as we entered the house and she showed me a seat she asked:

"What is wrong, doctor, that I am seeing you in the morning like this?"

A forced smile crept languidly across my weary face, from the left corner of my mouth to the right. I had come out of my operating theatre several times to tell anxious relatives that their patient could not make it. Many times. And I would do it with disarming ease, with almost inhuman indifference. But, even though my friend was still very much alive, well and strong, I found this the hardest piece of bad news to deliver. There was some hesitation in my voice when I said:

"Madam, you know I always have a lot of work in the hospital this way. We have some final year students here on practice, so I come down quite frequently to examine them."

She put her hand over her mouth as if to shout, looked at the roof and about her nervously and then said:

"Don't blame me, doctor, but we women are like that. Since you took your friend from here, any time I see you here I am afraid. I don't know why, doctor."

My left foot tapped the earthen floor several times. I said nothing but I was unconsciously making her feel disturbed again.

"Doctor, let me make you some small tea."

“No, thank you, madam. Don’t worry yourself...”

“Worry myself, doctor?” Look at you who have been killing your self to cross the whole world just to make us happy. You do not think that you worry yourself. How can I be worrying myself by just going into the kitchen to put water on the fire for you? And doctor, you have never eaten anything in this house.”

I could not stop her.

“O.K., madam, go ahead and make it. I will drink.” I said.

“What I wanted to say was that before I left the hotel I asked them to prepare breakfast for me...”

“No, doctor, you must to eat only here. You will drink my tea.”

She went into the kitchen and put water on the fire which she made. To take shock out of what I was going to say I tried to make the visit as natural as possible. I allowed her to prepare the tea before resuming my talk with her. She filtered it and put it in a large cup which she set before me. I took it, thanked her and took a sip. Then returning the cup on the table I said calmly:

“Madam.”

Manda did not know what I wanted to say but she looked very startled by the deep feeling in my voice which I had tried very unsuccessfully to conceal.

“Doctor, what?”

I told her:

“I am just from Ovenga where I was supposed to collect the examination time-table for my friend. See the receipt I was given for the money which I sent in January by registered mail.”

I held out the piece of paper to Manda. She looked at it but something rendered her incapable of stretching out her hand and taking the paper.

“The British Council never received the money I sent to Ovenga on his behalf”

“What, doctor?”

“The Post office people stole the money.”

“What does this mean, doctor, your friend will not take the exam, doctor?”

“Not this June, Madam”

The poor woman, she threw herself flat on the floor and screamed. I came up to her and, laying my hand on her told her:

“Take it easy, madam. I have not said he will never take it again...”

“Doctor, but you wrote saying that by September he should be in the United...”

“That does not cancel the plans at all.”

“Weh! Doctor, tell me, I am listening. You say it does not cancel the plan? Can he go without taking an exam?”

“Well, he can’t go without taking the exams. He will have to take the exam in January. We shall have to postpone the plans. See here, I have registered him MYSELF for the January 1972 Series. I still know that it will be a matter of formality because whatever happens, if he takes the exam he will surely pass. He has been sufficiently prepared. Everything was going strictly according to plan until this slight setback. His departure for the U.S. is only a question of time. Everything has been perfectly mapped out.”

“But where will he be staying, doctor? Doctor, you were saying that, perhaps you will go somewhere again for six months next year...”

“That’s precisely why I have decided to come here first and talk to you. As for the trip to Europe, it is not yet quite certain. But even if I were not to go anywhere, I had already found that he will feel freer and more comfortable if he lived away from me....”

Manda had misunderstood me completely. Her brows pulled together and she clapped her hands:

“Doctor, I am just begging you. Please, don’t drive your friend. He cannot fit to come back here like that. He must...”

“I am not driving him, madam. The point is that I am sincerely convinced that my presence both helps and disturbs him. I must be honest with you, madam”

“How can it disturb him, doctor, when you are doing all of that for him?”

“It is not easy to explain but you should have known by now that Dennis is a very sensitive man.”

“He is, doctor.”

“He is fond of looking at things from angels which you can never imagine. You see by virtue of my training as a doctor I can infer from people’s actions what is going on in their minds. I cannot explain this, but if I can get Dennis to live in a place where nobody knows him, in a place where he would have money available from me to take care of him without having to see me every day or even without thinking of me, he will succeed in everything that he will undertake. Let me repeat that I am going to continue to take care of you people. Decide where you think you might want to live and I shall make enough money available so that you can rent a small house and live in while he prepares for his exams. What do you think about it, madam?”

“Doctor, you are our heaven and earth, you are our God, whatever you say I cannot...”

“Madam, that is to misunderstand my duty,” I said. “Had it been that I had succeeded in the plans I had mapped out for my friend, I would damn the consequences and accept the compliment. But I was very human, most fallibly human, a victim of uncertainties, of the unpredictable. I told her:

“I am only a friend. It is only by an accident that Dennis is not rich too. I am simply trying to see if I could use my God-given position to make life better for you people. You are still perfectly free to disagree with me on any suggestion. It is what I have been trying to make Dennis understand too...”

“When are you going back, doctor?”

“I came only for this, madam. I am going right back from here. Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to go with you, doctor.”

“We must have to think over what you have said, Dennis and me. There is something I will tell him. I know what I will tell him. I will go with the children too. I want him to be looking at the children while I am talking to him. Even if it is for him to stop all the school and do some handwork, I will talk to him. My husband is very misfortunate, doctor.”

I shook my head sadly and told her.

“Well, you may be right, madam. But I think things will turn out bright. Every cloud has a silver lining. There is really much hope. All is not lost yet.”

Chapter Twenty

*

Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa

MANDA, DIEUDONNE, Felix and myself arrived in Menako a little after midnight. I had left three days before, promising to return that same day. But I had not kept my word. My wife had contacted some of my friends who had telephoned to Ovenga only to hear that I left there the same day that I came. Everybody in the house had been worried over my whereabouts.

Gertrude and two drivers of the service cars were sitting in the parlour when I drove into the compound. My kids were asleep. When I came in I was not only tired but hungry, and completely downcast. I greeted Gertrude and holding Manda's hand, I said nonchalantly:

"This is Dennis's wife and children, Gertrude." Then I told Manda:

"This is my wife."

"Good evening madam," Manda said as soon as I spoke.

Gertrude did not answer. Can you believe that? It would appear she thought Gertrude had not heard. Poor Manda, she greeted again, going up to her with all the respect that she thought the wife of a man who was saving her husband deserved.

Gertrude turned away without saying a word, without touching her hand.

Mortified but calm, Manda retreated to a chair at the dining table and sat with the children. Manda was a most perceptive woman, and at that single flash I was sure that

she may have jumped to incredible conclusions as to why the project had failed. If Gertrude could behave with calculated cruelty towards a woman she had never seen before, I could imagine her thinking, then it was impossible to gauge the extent to which she must have made life in that house unbearable for Dennis.

All this happened within one minute. I had stepped back and was watching from the door into the room. But, for several reasons my entire thought system seemed to have been suddenly dislodged. First, since learning of the missing money order, a certain spectre of the failure of the project had begun to hover in the backwards of my mind, intensifying each time I thought of Dr. William and what he would say to me. That thought became more and more real and more and more frightening as I came nearer and nearer Menako. Then, the sight of the drivers and all that it suggested to my disturbed mind... And then Gertrude's cruel attitude!

I passed into my room to hang up my coat. Gertrude rose and followed me inside and tried to talk, but I prevented her by walking out immediately. I passed through the parlour and went out of the house. Gertrude mused round the room for a minute and then I heard her slam the door.

I left the room through the balcony door, I was going to speak to Dennis, but I did not want to go with Manda. I deliberately wanted to talk to him alone, first.

There was light in Dennis' room. The door was shut but when I felt it, it was not locked. I opened and went in. Dennis lay peacefully stretched on his bed with his hands crossed over his chest in a manner which drove waves of horror through me. I took three nervous steps and, standing by the bed, looked steadily at his breast. It was rising and falling. I felt relieved. Placing my right hand gently over his forehead I called:

“Bo Dennis, wake up.”

Dennis yawned and opened his eyes.

“Oh bo Max. You have come back?”

“Ya, ya, I have just come. I am sorry to disturb your sleep.”

“You cannot say so, Max.”

He rose and sat on the bed. He was wearing his jumpa over his pyjamas top. The sheet he had been covering hid the lower part of his body so that I could not quite see what he was wearing, but it looked like it was the khaki pair of shorts.

“Something wrong, bo Max? why are you looking at me like that?”

I feigned a fleeting smile.

“How am I looking at you?”

Dennis discarded the sheet he was covering, buttoned his pair of shorts and sat up on the edge of the bed.

“Well, there is actually something slightly wrong. Just slightly,” I said.

He cleaned his eyes with the back of his hands.

“You have not brought back the time-table, bo Max?”

He enquired, looking straight into my eyes and even through them.

With Dennis, it would appear, all failures were thoroughly foreseen, even if they could not be borne.

I nodded several times, surprised, amazed, sad.

“That is what has happened, bo Dennis,” I said painfully.

“The Post Office stole the money?” he asked.

“That is exactly what happened. How come you could guess it so well?”

He said cynically:

“It was for Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem that you sent the money. It could never had reached.”

I sat mute for a moment and told him:

“But I have registered you again for January 1972. I did it myself, so whatever you are thinking about yourself, I already have your receipt for that exam. Here it is. It is signed by the Exams officer himself at the British Council.”



That dreaded look of morbid melancholy played on his visage. Dennis's lips pouted in an inane grin. He did not look at the receipt which I was giving him to see. I was sitting quite near him, in fact, just about a metre away. But I seemed to see a distance between us. Perhaps Dennis saw it too. That very great distance which I had thought and, in fact, still hoped I could bridge. Now with the receipt of this news the distance became a chasm. I saw Dennis thousands and thousands of kilometres away on the other side. But I thought he was so far away mainly because he was determined to see himself as distant from life itself. He asked me:

"So what will you do with me, Doctor?"

I was careful to note that he did not say *bo*. Did he now find it very inappropriate to call me *bo*?

"You will take it in January next year. As I said, I have re-registered you."

"Where will I be by then? I cannot continue to be here and..."

"That's something we have to work out first. In fact, I have had to bring..."

He grimaced, his eyes seemed to bulge and then retreat into their sockets. There followed a sharp hollow laugh that re-echoed in the coldness of the little room. He looked at me and asked with the habitual softness in his voice.

"Doctor, did I not tell you that this thing will not work?"

"How has it not worked, Dennis?" I spoke as I felt almost insulted. Dennis did not seem to lose his calm. He said:

"I have been here for nearly one year, and I have done nothing yet, forcing you to abandon your patients and duties in the office to be going to Mbongo every day. And it looks as if I am only going to start again. How has it not failed, Doctor?"

I tried to confront what was beginning to look like a frightening but irrefutable reality.

"It has not failed at all," I insisted. "It has only been delayed. The Art Exposition will still go on in July as originally planned. That wide publicity will still be carried out as scheduled. You will still take the TOFEL exam in September. The fly in the ointment is that you will not be able to go to the U.S. at the time we had imagined because we shall need your G.C.E. results to boost your application forms. So you see that we have not failed at all in the sense you may be thinking about. As a matter of fact, we have succeeded up to a point in that we have at last been able to discover something and make up our minds about what you really can do in life."

"And if I fail the G.C.E.?" he asked from somewhere down his throat.

"You will not fail," I declared. "You will never fail if you take it. Between you and me," I lowered my voice to a whisper, "I can have somebody with a younger and brighter mind take the exam at the same time with you, write your name and everything and at the end we would eliminate the paper you submit. I don't see you not making the goddam required number of G.C.E. papers."

"And if they discover what you intend to do?"

"They who?"

"The exam authorities, the Police."

"The whole plan has been so thoroughly worked out as to eliminate any possibility of failure, if only you appear for the exam. Why can't you look at the bright side of things, Dennis?"

"You have seen it yourself, Doctor," he began, his eyes clouding. "My life has no bright side," he said, his face cast in a mould of resolute despair. "And let me make one confession to you, doctor."

"What confession?" I asked.

“You asked me on X-mas eve whether I was the one who took a picture from the album, the picture in which we all were in the primary school. I told you so, twice. But I was the one who took it.”

I rose and literally tumbled back in the chair on which I had been sitting. Why had Dennis to make that confession at that particular moment? Why had he said *no* the day I asked him? Could Gertrude have been right in saying that she had caught him stealing money from the house? What money did he lack that he would do that?

An icy shiver ran through me like an electric current. I was beginning to be infected by his despair. I told the son-of-a-bitch:

“Dennis, you are making life very burdensome for me, you know?”

He tried to talk but I waved at him to be silent. I could no longer be compassionate.

“Why the hell had you to take the picture?” I blasted.

“What stopped you from asking me to reprint it and give you as many copies as you wanted.?”

Dennis rose and bending under the bed pulled out his handbag and opened it and drew out the tell-tale picture and gave it to me to look at. I examined it closely.

“Is that how that picture was when you showed me the first time?” he asked me.

I shook my head gently and asked:

“Who put the cross on your face here?”

“That was why I took the picture, doctor. Your daughter, Belinda, told me that it was your wife who did it. When I asked her she said it was the children who did it. I did not like to see my face with a cross. So stole it. The children saw me, but I wanted to take it.”

“And you did not mention it to me, Dennis?” I asked him.

“Do you know that it is very inhuman act for her to have done? You should have told me. I told you from the day you came here that if anybody did anything to you which

you thought offensive you should not hesitate to let me know. And I clearly told you that by anybody I was not exempting Gertrude.

“I could not tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because my whole stay here would have been taken up with everyday complaints. Your wife forced me to wash her underwear. She encouraged the servants to make a laughing stock of me. When you said I could take one of your coats to the dance, your wife came into the room and found me measuring one of them on me. She called for all the servants and told them that she had found me searching the pockets of your clothes for money to steal. How could I be reporting all these to you? Your wife feels that you are spending all your money on me and my family, and that I am eating all the food in this house. She believes that I have told you not to bring her brother to live here.”

I rose and like a sleep-walker sauntered out of the little house.

“And the children too?”

She nodded, scrutinizing me curiously, as though I were a ghost.

*

Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem

“Why is Doctor Maximillian killing himself like this?” I wondered aloud, banging my hands on the dining table. I was just about to say something else when the voice of Gertrude interrupted me. She was not just shouting as usual, but spitting out one obscenity after another in uncontrollable fury, her voice pitched high in a savage crescendo. She was saying:

“Family members are there dying of hunger. I have now made it a song, begging you to bring my brother here to study. Every month you say next month. But you are there squandering left and right on vagabonds, ex-convicts and idiots who cannot even wash their faces correctly when they get out of bed in the morning. Buying everything for a man and his wife as if he is lame, as if he is blind. If he was your classmate, where was he when others were studying to take care of themselves and their families?”

“Enough is enough, Gertrude,” Dr. Max yelled. “I am about to lose myself. But before that happens, let me say something: my friend, Dennis, is no vagabond. He did not apply to come and live here. I took him from his house as you well know. He is happily married, with children. It was my own decision to ask him to come here. So if you are talking any amount of shit about him you should know that I knew him, lived with him and played with him long before I ever heard that a viper, a vampire, a witch, a devil like yourself had been thrown out of hell into this world.

“And get this straight. I had agreed that your brother will come to live here as from July. I have lately been making arrangements to that effect. Now he will not. None of your devilish relatives will ever be allowed to set foot in this house, for as long as I live. And if you have any holes in your head to hear with, hear now: I was about to decide that my friend should leave this house for somewhere else, now he will not; he will remain in this house with his wife and children for as long as it pleases him. If it tickles you, just pack whatever rag you have ever owned in this house and quit this same night.

“I never asked you for marriage. It was my uncle who posted you to me in Europe. And you came there already pregnant. Belinda is not my child. You honestly know that. I have been struggling for years to forget it and take you as my wife. But you keep reminding me that I was a fool in the

first place to have slept with my colleagues, you have gone to bed with my drivers, one of whom is in the parlour now. You take the slightest opportunity at parties to go looking for men in bushes. Then you come to ask my own personal friend whom I have invited to live with me to wash your underwear; you mark crosses across the pictures of my own friend as if he were dead. You wish him dead, but you will be the first to die. I can stomach no more."

Not a sound issued from the room for a whole minute. Even our own children sat still. We had heard what we were not supposed to hear. We had heard what we did not want to hear.

And then, Manda and myself saw Dr. Max come out of the room. In his anger he had forgotten that there were strangers around.

"Bo, Dennis, those children need sleep," he said as soon as he re-entered the parlour.

One of his drivers had already escaped. He said nothing more. He took Manda aside. I knew that he wanted to tell her why he was so bitter. When Manda rose and turned and looked at me, there were tears in her eyes and on her cheeks.

Holding the hands of the two sleepy boys I walked out of the parlour without saying anything to Manda. As I descended the stairs, I heard Manda's voice.

"Doctor, let me talk first, I beg you," she said.

I continued on my way down.

"Call my husband and tell him to go with us back to Mbongo," I thought I heard her saying. The rest of what they said was meaningless, nonsense. As meaningless and as nonsensical as my whole life had been. The voice continued to ring more and more faintly in my ears. Then the exchange proceeded without apparent prelude:

"To Mbongo, madam?"

"Yes, doctor,"

"Did you not say you had something to tell him here, madam?"

"I said so, doctor. Doctor, I did not know that this is how things were for him. There is nothing I can talk to him now and he will understand."

"Madam"

"Doctor"

"How about getting somewhere else for you to live as I ..."

"No, doctor."

"We have to go back to Mbongo."

"But you cannot just..."

"We have to go back to Mbongo, doctor."

"You can't go this night. Madam. It has to be in the morning. I'll have to arrange for some means of transport to..."

"No, doctor. We have to go, this night. If we don't find any lorry to take us, we shall walk on foot."

"To Mbongo?"

"Yes, doctor."

"With the children and all?"

"Yes, doctor."

*

For me there was no problem anymore. It was plain that God had at last shown me the one just way out of that labyrinth of darkness that had been my life. I would simply put a full stop to all the tortures.

The children were going to sleep, but so was I too. That was the last journey I would make between those two houses - Dr. Max's house and mine. Something to make the world laugh. I talked of my house. Had I a house?

From where I stood, at the foot of Dr. Max's house I was seeing the light in my house through the louvers of the window. But I could not get there, going backwards, thinking I was going forward, halting, fumbling, stepping on the children's toes and they stepping on mine, cursing obscenely

and thinking deeply at every misleading pace as I had done throughout my hollow life. My future, as my past, I concluded with unflinching decision, had been thoroughly mapped out by destiny – one conspicuous biological fact, a law of nature, a relentlessly unalterable pattern of self-deceit and failure.

I was thirty-one years old and during those years on this cursed earth, although I had achieve nothing, I had seen one thing- every human being was created by God for a definite purpose. Every human being occupied a unique position on earth. It was no accident that I had been born and bred in the same place and made to attend the same school with Essemu, now Doctor Maximillian, in charge of the University Teaching Hospital in Menako. God had created us to show to the world the two possible faces of human existence – the glorious and the repugnant. Essemu, Dr. Maximillian Essemu Alekwieunchaa, came to show, in fact, was sent purposely to show the world the achieving side, their successful side, the side that they would aspire to always. And I Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem, I had been sent to show man his other side, his back side, the side of shame, the side from which everything human ought to shrink...

I had done my duty. Mankind had already learnt enough from me, I ought not overdo it. I should not force mankind to see more than was necessary from me. Go back to Mbongo? You and who? Go back to answer questions in the world. They knew me everywhere and before I arrived anywhere they would know that the bird of ill-omen was on its way.... I would never rise above the level of vagabond, an ex-convict, a dish-washer, the washer of women's underpants. That is truly where I belonged.

What greatness was I aspiring to from that swamp of disgrace and torture? I had caused the dismissal of Aruna, that innocent houseboy who might never find another job

with such a good man as Dr. Maximillian Essemó Aleukwienchaa. Now I had caused the relatives of Gertrude to be banned from the house. And Gertrude, she was never to be Dr. Maximillian Essemó's true wife. Because of me he had been forced to say what he would never have said. And it was I, Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem, that had aggravated everything.

Nobody ever paid so much for greatness. How much did it cost Dr. Maximillian Essemó to be the God that he had become overnight? Nothing. Just nothing. I will never pass the G.C.E. Examinations. The papers will never reach me. Planes crash every day. The plane carrying the G.C.E. papers for January 1972 will crash and there will be no exam that season. And Dr. maximillian Essemó Alekwieunchaa will ask me to stay on. And I will do so. And on and on and on. No.

I will save them all the trouble of not knowing what to do with me in the end. I will put the final fullstop to it all... And for those innocent children of mine! Those festering wounds in my memory. It was never my fault that they were ever born. I had just done what everybody else was doing – marrying their mother for a wife. But they will never starve to death, even if they never forgive me. Dr. Max will make them accept and use what he could not drown me in – his money and power.

Having thus made up my mind I saw clearly the open road to the house. I walked briskly to the door, opened and entered.

Dr. Max had given me several bed sheets. I took two which I wound into a solid rope and bound together. The two children had begun to snore. I placed a chair on the table, placed a stool on the chair and mounted on it. From the stool I was able to reach a timber which crossed the roof at the ceiling level. There I attached the rope and, when I was sure that it was firm and secured round the timber, I

made a loop with the end that hung from the roof. I put it over my head in such a way that it could only tighten and cut me off from suffering, if the chair and the stool gave way under me. I clenched my teeth and as if I was the very last man to die, stepped over the edge of the stool, which slid off and fell to the floor, waking the children in the process.

Epilogue

*

Maximillian Essemole Alekwieunchaa

IT WAS Manda who first brought the noise to my notice. “Somebody is shouting and calling, doctor.” “From where?” I thought I was waking from a dream. Her rejection of all my suggestions on the future plans for them had plunged me into such deep thought that I literally forgot myself. I walked to the balcony at the back. In my benumbing mind I was confident that it was Dennis who was calling, although I would not have said anything if somebody asked me why I thought he might be calling.

“The roof of the boys’ quarters has collapsed,” the voice shouted again. “And I can hear children crying from within,” the man said.

I instantly came to myself. It was the voice of my neighbour’s brother, I realized.

To this date, I don’t remember how Manda and myself got to the small house. I don’t know which of us got there before the other. What I recollect is that somebody tried to dissuade me from leaping over the balcony.

Less than one minute after the man yelled that last bit of information, Manda and myself were at the door. Gertrude soon joined us.

“Phone the ambulance,” I told her as we laboured to get in. It was only at this point that I sent for a torchlight. The door opened only inward, and the falling roof timber had blocked it from within. It was not possible to get in from

the roof because it had caved in and one could even create more problems for the children who seemed to have survived the catastrophe. The children were screaming and shrieking fiercely, more out of fright, as I found out later, than from pain or injury.

There was no way to restrain Manda who ran round the compound, howling even louder than the trapped children.

"My whole family is finished-ohhh, my whole family is finished-ohh!" she shouted. She must have run round the house more than three times in one scary minute while we sought a means of getting in.

From the crowd that had gathered instantly, a muscular sympathizer stepped out and heaved the door off one of its hinges with his shoulder. For his troubles, splinters of wood tore through his flesh and in the twilight we could see blood sprouting and staining his greyish-white shirt. He did not stop to have it bandaged as I shouted. He thought the same way that we did, that the children inside must be taken out first.

"The wound won't kill me, doctor," the man said courageously. "Let us only try and get at the children. They must be dying."

Completely ignoring his own pain, the man squeezed himself through a slight opening between the twisted zinc and the rafters.

"I can see the children," he shouted with an excitement that restored our spirits.

"What of the father?" Manda asked.

"Father?"

"Yes," I said. "There was a man with them."

Nobody had tried to figure out what had happened to bring the entire roof crashing down on those innocent children, and perhaps their father. The valiant stranger was just about to ask again whether we were sure there was a man with the children when somebody groaned.

“There is a man inside,” he shouted.

I had practically torn off my shirt and joined the man inside. There were now about six people in the roofless building. Within twenty minutes we succeeded in extracting the children. They were frightened, but safe. It was only when we tried to pull them out that they sustained real cuts. It was harder to reach Dennis. He continued to groan in serious pain, but his voice sounded strangled.

This did not alarm me because I had never known him to have a loud voice. Some five people got hold of one side of the timber to which the zinc was nailed and summoned effort to lift it from the body of Dennis.

“Greeeeee-Jeh!” one shouted.

“Yeh,” the others answered.

“Greeeeee-eh-jeh!” he shouted.

“Yeh!” the others answered again. He said it the third time, they answered.

“One time...” they jerked it about a meter from the fallen position. But they let it fall almost immediately on Dennis, inflicting more pain. They let it fall for two reasons. First of all it was very heavy. Secondly, the higher they lifted it the more excruciating Dennis’ pain seemed to become.

They made two more attempts, each only inflicting greater pain on the victim. The third attempt almost ended in a second tragedy. Manda, seeing an opening had slipped through to pull her husband out. As he screamed and as the structure weighed on them, they let it fall on both of them. When we succeeded in getting her out we found that she was wounded on ck. While I attended to her I suggested that the roof should be lifted towards the wall and made to lean against it.

For a time it worked, and we were able to reach Dennis without anybody holding the planks up. But a frightening detail surfaced in the mysterious accident. Dennis was actually suspending in the space between the table and the

bed from which the children had been removed. A chair was lying across his chest, and a stool caught in the legs of the chair.

Somebody reached him from under the table which remained intact, in spite of the fact that the entire roof had collapsed on to it. Dennis seemed inextricably glued to the little space, even after the stool and the chair had been pushed away from under the table. A second person managed to reach him from under the table, passing under the bed. The two breathed a momentary sigh of relief and began to drag Dennis.

Not only did he wail the more, the roof which had been suspended against the wall came down on all three men under. But it was easier this time to lift the roof because the two other men under pushed the roof from beneath. The first man to reach Dennis' feet recoiled in disgust. He was stinking. Incredibly, some pressure had forced Dennis' sphincters to give way, allowing his bowels to empty themselves in his pants.

In spite of the fetid odour the men worked hard at it until one of the men shouted:

"Jesus Christ of Timbuktu!" and began to pull himself back out.

"What is happening!" I asked. "Is he dead?"

"That man had tried to hang himself," he said. "There is a rope round his neck, and the rope is tied to one of the purling that is broken. That is what brought down the whole house."

Manda was a woman with extrasensory perceptions. She caught only the tail end of the bizarre bit of information the man was relaying to me. But she knew what had happened. She leaped into the crumbling room and bent down. I was directly behind her.

"Dig him out very carefully," I said softly.

The rest of the rescue job was done in glum solemnity,

as if instead of digging him out, earth was being dumped on to the lowered coffin of a scoundrel. Somebody ran for a knife and with it the rope from Dennis's neck was cut off from the decaying purling. Dennis was pulled out and dragged to the lawn. He was actually thrown on the lawn. The realization of what he had done drove pity from the hearts of all those who had come to help. Dennis was not dead. He was in pain, but even more than that, he looked paralysed with shame and disgrace. He lifted his body from the grass and sat up by his own effort and looked round. I am not sure he saw anything above the knees of anybody from that lowered position. He may not have known where he was, whether he was in heaven or hell, or limbo, or still on earth. His last judgment would not be any different.

"And you would take my children with you, Dennis?" Manda asked and walked away. I took two steps towards him and pointed the torch flush in his face. There were many things on my mind, but I found voice for only a few.

"This is how you would pay me for all that I set out to do for you Dennis?" I asked the bastard.

He did not answer.

"We will all die," I said. "But this is no way to die. Not after I have done all this for you. I am glad that God has denied you even that."

The End

“No Way to Die is unquestionably a psychological novel... Asong revalues the traditional Freudian relationship between the Id, Ego, and Superego and as such demonstrates a certain degree of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ and manifests his craftsmanship...”

Professor Charles Atangana Nama, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Buea, Cameroon.

“Excellent psychological portraiture... a real world of tragic circumstances and events.”

Professor Robett McLaren, University of Regina, Canada

What happens when a young man of talent and visions of greatness falls victim to a cruel set of circumstances over which he has no control? No Way to Die is such a story. Dennis Nunqam Ndendemajem gives up! Even when he is given a second chance to start again, he refuses to gather the broken pieces of his life together. He refuses to rebuild, and refuses to live. But he also finds no way to die.

Linus Asong was born in the South West Region of Cameroon in 1947. With a combined B.A honours in Education, in 1980 he entered the University of Windsor in Canada whence he graduated with a terminal degree in Creative Writing. He holds an M.A and a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta, in Edmonton Canada, and is presently Associate Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Ecole Normale Supérieure Bambili (University of Yaounde 1). Asong is a stand-up humorist, a consummate portrait painter, an accomplished literary scholar, and a celebrated prolific writer with over a dozen novels to his credit.



**Langaa Research & Publishing
Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Region
Cameroon**

ISBN 978-9956-558-46-9

